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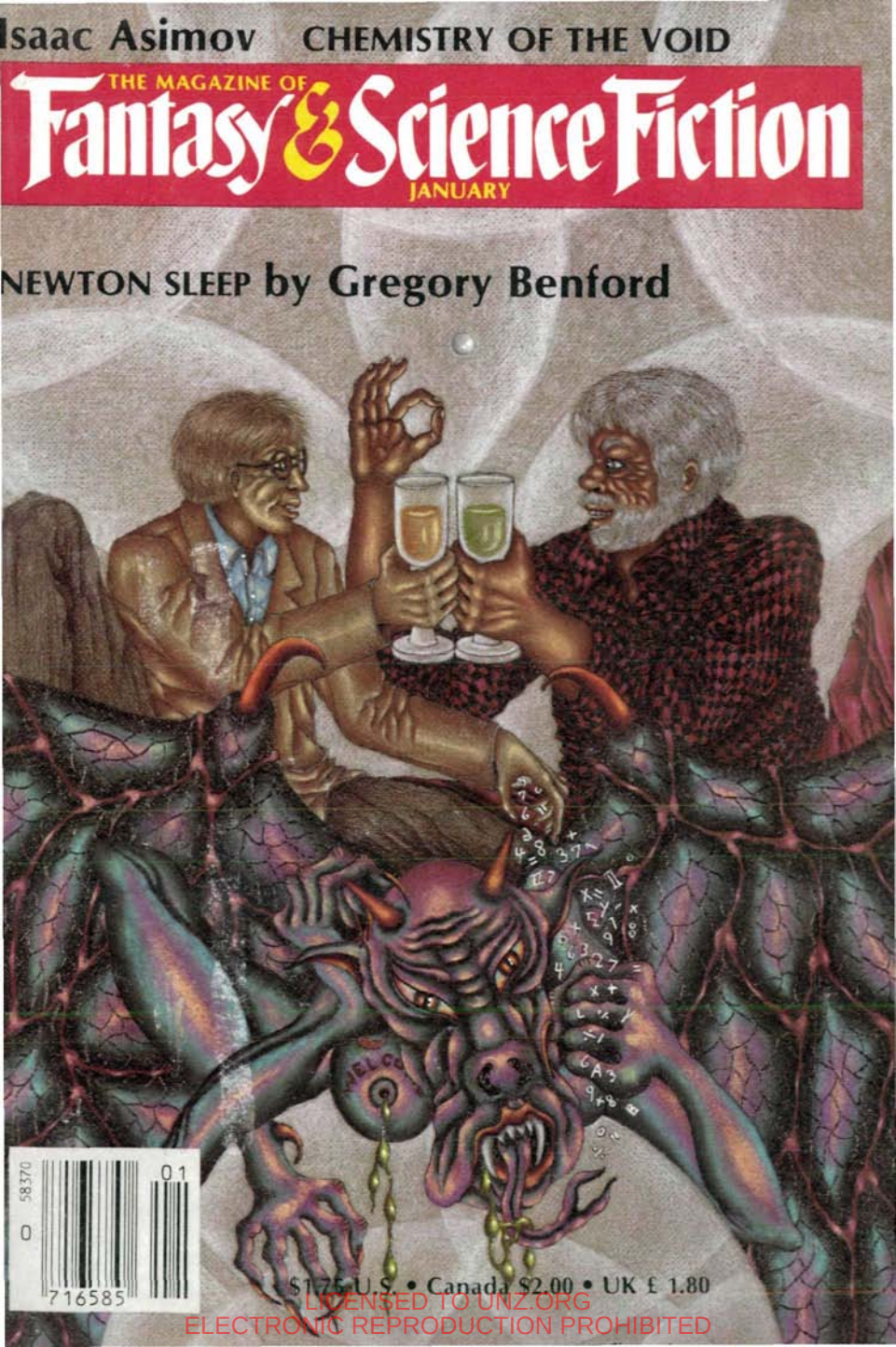

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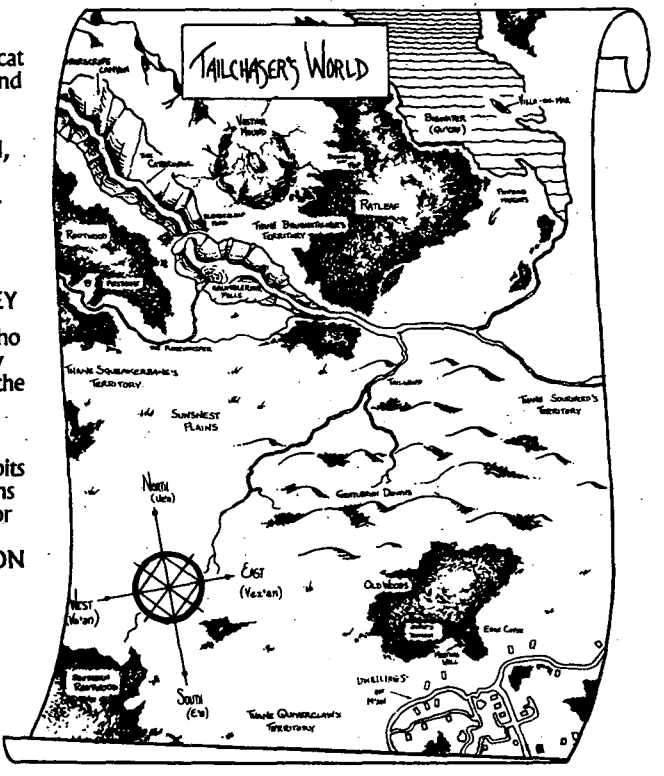

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Robert Charles Wilson's first F&SF story was an artful fantasy titled "The Blue Gularis" (July 1985). His second story is completely different but equally adroit: a pointed SF tale about the ultimate in artificial implants.

State of the Art

BY

ROBERT CHARLES WILSON

It was the eyes that attracted him first. They sat in the window of the ocular shop, nestled on velvet, protein-compatible nerve conduits dangling behind. The eyes were a polished silver so reflective that they seemed to contain the world; and the irises were icy blue disks.

Rogan thought about the eyes during the long drive home. They were Bausch & Lomb Full Spectrum Day-and-Nighters. The price, printed on a discreet white tag, was outrageous.

"More than outrageous," Margaret said when, tentatively, he raised the subject. "You don't need such a thing. You do O.K."

Once she had been beautiful. Rogan knew that many men, the fortunate ones, think their wives are beautiful; but of Margaret it was an objective, demonstrable truth. Because she was shy she had refused to enter the Queen of Classics Department competition when they were in college; but she would have won, everybody said so. Her hair had been long and full and blonde. Her skin was china pale, her features fine, her eyes a delicate brown. Her smile had been like flashbulbs going off.

And the truth was that she was still good-looking, Rogan thought, but time had fretted at her as it had fretted at him, and they were both looking a little worn. "I'm tired of the contact lenses," he said.

"So get new ones. But not this."

Really, it *didn't* make any sense. He said, a last, hopeless salvo, "If we put off the new car for a while—"

"Ben, you want that car. You said so."

So he put the Day-and-Nighters out of his mind. In the morning he walked past the ocular shop — be-

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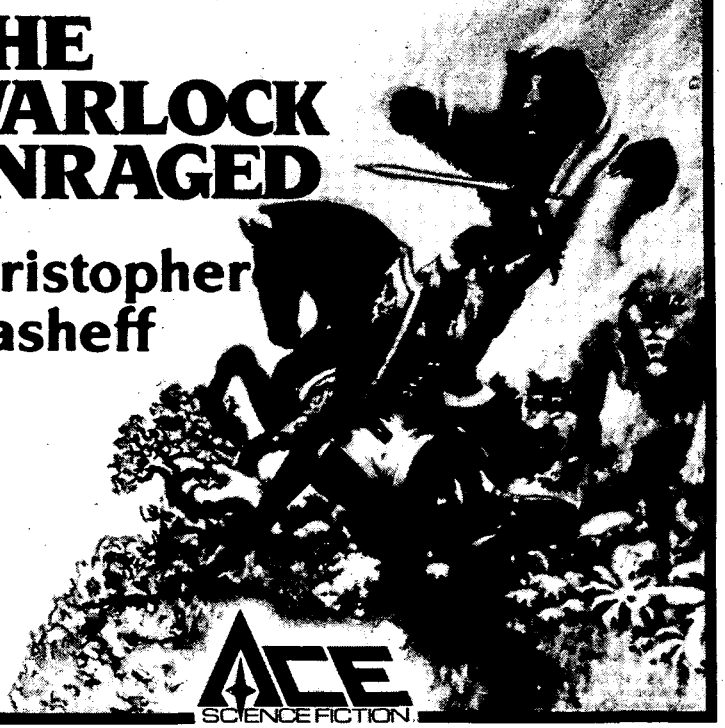
THE WARLOCK ENRAGED

by Christopher Stasheff



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ACE SCIENCE FICTION

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tween the parking lot and the office where he worked — with a stern and willful disinterest. The eyes gazed back at him from the window, balefully.

Rogan was a Databloc Ordinator. He sat at a terminal all day monitoring the flow and exchange of information between his employer's corporate mainframe and all the other mainframes and databanks it accessed. These were displayed on his CRT as building blocks of various sizes and color. Rogan's job was to make sure they meshed and separated in the right sequence. He was something like an air traffic controller. Usually everything was O.K. When it wasn't, he had to investigate and sort things out, tapping madly at his keyboard while the terminal howled and blinked. This happened maybe once a day.

Today, however, there was nothing, and Rogan grew bored watching the colored blocks stack and unstack themselves on the screen. He was pleased when his afternoon relief, a tall and athletic man named Forster, came in and hung his coat on the peg. Rogan wanted desperately to get away.

"Whenever you're ready," Forster said.

"It's all yours," Rogan said. "Thank God." He stood up. He stretched. He turned. The breath seemed to catch in his throat.

"Something wrong?" Forster asked.

"No," Rogan said. "No, nothing at all."

Forster stared at him, the silvery orbs of his eyes catching the fluorescent light, and for a moment Rogan saw his own reflection there.

"The physical attachment takes only a short time," the ocularist explained. "The nerve glues, the muscle sealants, are very fast-acting. You'll be operational twenty minutes after you come out of surgery. No: the time for taking time is now. While you have the choice."

The sheer number of eyes in the shop daunted him. The display occupied an entire wall. Some of the Japanese-manufactured units were mounted in pale mannequin faces, where they twitched back and forth as if in the throes of a mute and terrible panic. Some were silver, like Forster's; some were tinted a deep compelling blue; several were translucent, and he could see the tiny machinery inside, like camera lenses in aspic. Rogan felt dizzy; he began to perspire. Maybe this wasn't such a wise idea after all. Maybe Margaret was right.

"The best ones," Rogan said helplessly. "Which are the best ones?"

"Depends," the ocularist said. "Do you have a special application in mind? Do you scuba dive? Hunt animals at night? Practice astronomy as a hobby?"

"No," Rogan said. "I just want—"

"A good all-rounder," the ocularist supplied.

"The *best* all-rounder." He tried to sound firm.

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The ocularist went to the window display and lifted the velvet-lined pedestal with the Bausch & Lombs on it. He put them on a glass-topped counter for Rogan to admire, stepping back as Rogan bent closer, smiling distantly.

"Shake them," he suggested. "No telltale rattle of cheap machinery there."

"Should I? I'm not sure—"

"They don't take fingerprints," the ocularist sniffed. "And they're not fragile."

Rogan picked one up. It was firm and cool to the touch. The embedded iris glittered like an exotic gem.

"But the price," he said regretfully.

"Ah," the ocularist said. His manner became stiff, formal. He drew away the Bausch & Lombs. "We do of course carry other lines."

He took a blank box from beneath the counter. Inside, two fishy white eyes lay on a bed of tissue paper. Rogan reached halfheartedly to touch one.

"Careful, now," the ocularist said.

Rogan sighed. "It's all right. I'll take the Bausch & Lombs."

"The intelligent choice, I think. We can arrange financing. And we offer a generous trade-in value on your unwanted biologicals."

"My what?"

"Your eyes," the ocularist said.

He left work early on the day that had been arranged. The entire process, including the time spent blindfolded while muscles knitted and the anesthetic wore off, took less than three hours. The first thing Rogan noticed when his new eyes were unbandaged was that the winter light beyond the window had failed.

"But I can see," he marveled. "I can read — my God, I can read the billboard at Bay Street!" Five city blocks away: it was an ad for synthetic meat. "At night!"

The ocularist sat impassive in his surgical whites, making notations on a clipboard. He had a Medical Technician's degree framed and hung on the wall of his inner office; Rogan amused himself by deciphering the Latinate fine print.

"Everything moves?" the ocularist said. "Up, down, side to side?"

"Yes."

He pried up Rogan's eyelids and pressed an ophthalmoscope against his orbits. "No blind spots? Everything seems lucid?"

"Yes." He added, "They feel a bit raw. A kind of pressure—"

"It fades in time."

It had faded, in fact, by the time Rogan arrived home. He had not told Margaret about the Bausch & Lombs; he wanted to present her with a *fait accompli*. Now, riding the elevator up to their condo, he felt a knot of anxiety in his stomach. How would she react?

The surprising thing was she did *not* react. Oh, there was a moment,

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after he had kissed her, when she looked at him seriously for a time, and he knew she *must* have noticed; his eyes were silvery bright and touched with cornflower blue where, before, they had been merely bloodshot and watery. But she didn't remark on it. She tied back her apron and said dinner would be ready in a minute. Synthetic chicken, she said.

Rogan went into the bathroom to admire his new eyes. What he saw was gratifying. His face had always seemed somehow weak when he was forced to confront it in the mornings, frothing with toothpaste. Now — although his chin had not been noticeably firmed nor his sagging jowls tightened — he saw a face that was cool, aloof, almost threatening. A thrill ran through him.

She didn't react, Rogan thought, because she loves me. She had accepted his decision. Anyway, it was too late to fight it. His old eyes had probably been auctioned off to some charity hospital in equatorial Africa. He respected her choice by making no comment of his own, except about the chicken, which he said was good.

The real test came later. They made love.

It was awkward at first. Rogan felt embarrassed by his eyes, or rather was afraid they would embarrass Margaret; he kept them closed. Then, when her passion had begun to build, he allowed himself to look closely at her. There was none of the revulsion he had expected to see. He was pleased. The pace picked up. He began to stare — boldly.

She said she loved him. Rogan murmured that he loved her too, but now his new eyes were having an unsettling effect: he saw Margaret's face (although the room was dark) with an almost hallucinogenic clarity, saw the wrinkles that had begun to creep out from her eyelids, the faintly cracked skin of her mouth. The flesh between the ear and her collarbone was pale and finely skeined; the Bausch & Lombs made it a topography of ancient river valleys.

He closed his eyes and thought about the way she used to look.

He went to work in the morning eager for his next encounter with the relief man, Forster. It was a difficult day. There were three consecutive data collisions, each requiring an extensive and elaborate debugging. But the time passed. He stood up promptly when he heard Forster come.

The younger man gazed impassively at Rogan's new eyes.

"B&L's," he said finally. "Very impressive."

Rogan was pleased. Forster's eyes had come from one of the big Sino-Japanese cartels; Rogan was able to discern the trademark characters incised into the silver. Take that, he thought, you son of a bitch.

"Thanks," he said modestly.

"Hearts," Forster said. His smile was enigmatic.

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Rogan said, "What?"

"Hearts! Kidneys! Lungs! The vital organs!" He nudged Rogan painfully in the ribs. "That's where the real action is."

A complete internal revision is a complex procedure. It takes time. The price, naturally, reflects this fact."

Rogan had gone, not to a sidewalk ocularist this time, but to Hills and Rutherford, the most prestigious of the city's replacement agencies. The showroom was a shag-carpeted and wood-paneled chamber high in an office tower. The salesman was poised and tailored and his glittering eyes bore down on Rogan's own. Rogan felt inadequate in this setting, almost shabby. But he was captivated by the stock.

An artificial heart in a glass case flushed rose-tinted water through translucent tubing: the motion was smooth, effortless, and quiet as a whisper. Kidneys were racked against one wall like colorful coral growths. Boa-like ropes of intestine reclined on pegs. The effect, Rogan thought, was somehow tropical.

"Too," the salesman was saying, "one inevitably pays a premium for quality. What we sell here" — he passed Rogan a stainless-steel thighbone — "is state of the art in prosthetic technology."

He did not doubt it. "I assume there'll be a reasonable exchange value on my — uh, parts?"

"Well." The salesman cocked one eyebrow in the attitude of the connoisseur or the careful shopper. "We'll do what we *can*, of course."

Rogan figured he could take out a second mortgage.

Margaret accepted the change graciously. And she was resigned to the financial reversal — after all, he still had his job. She took day work at a software store. But Rogan could not convince her that she, too, should make the change.

"Take a good look," he said. "Am I any different? Really, am I?"

"Not on the outside," she said. They had argued, she had cried; her eyes were still puffy and red.

"But it's better," Rogan said. "It really is. I don't wake up in the middle of the night thinking, Jesus, I'm not a kid anymore, what about a coronary, what about kidney disease, what about my lungs? I could smoke if I wanted to. Tobacco! I can eat anything. I could eat a goddamn chair."

"Is that so important?"

"You bet it is!"

She seemed to soften. "It's all right for you, Ben. I understand. It's how you are. But I don't want to — to change in that way. And I don't understand why you want me to."

It was a tricky question. A part of him wanted to say: because you'd feel better, you'll feel younger, and we'll be together in this thing. That

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would have been O.K. But another part of him wanted to say: because you've aged, because you're not young and good-looking any more and because I'm increasingly disgusted at how primitive and biological you are. He hated the idea of her blood gushing through fleshy arteries clogged with the debris of a high-cholesterol diet, of the webwork of nerve and muscle, the pulsating animal processes. He had been like that once. Now he was cleaner, sleeker — better. He had replaced almost all his internal organs. And the replacements, though regrettably hidden, carried all the best trademarks.

"Consider doing it for me," Rogan said. "You still love me, don't you?"

"Of course I do!" She had become very serious. "Ben, I loved you *before* any of this. I loved you when you were a fat middle-aged man with ordinary eyes."

It was flattering, of course, but he couldn't bring himself to believe it.

How unfair it was! He had given her, finally, something *worthy* of love. Why couldn't she hold up her end of the bargain?

"I used to put my head on your chest," she said mournfully, "when you were sleeping. I'd listen to your heart beating. It was reassuring. A good sound. Now — " She sighed. "All I hear is a sound like the wind in the trees."

• • •

His new body and his new eyes made him feel hyperconfident at work. It was as if he could see the data collisions stacking up before they happened. By the time the red light started to flash, he'd be all the way into the mainframe, ready, trouble-shooting like crazy. He got a special commendation on the winter efficiency report.

Forster came in one dark afternoon shaking snow off his topcoat. "It's a bitch out there."

"I'll bet," Rogan said. But his eyes were on the screen. He was finishing off a heavy bug route. The datablocs were gliding now, slick as ice.

"Brought you coffee," Forster said. He placed the cup on Rogan's desk.

Rogan stared.

Forster's arm was sleek burnished aluminum. The fingers were slim and agile. Servomotors hummed, like the sound of distant cicadas. There was the heady aroma of warm machine oil.

"Thanks," Rogan said faintly.

"What you have in mind," the sales rep at Hills and Rutherford said, "is possible. Yes. It's even been done — to a few people, a few places. But the cost—!"

"I don't care," Rogan said.

He felt at home in the showroom now, at ease. He felt worthy of the fine things displayed around him. He felt — in an important way — part of them.

"You don't understand," the salesman said. "We're not talking about

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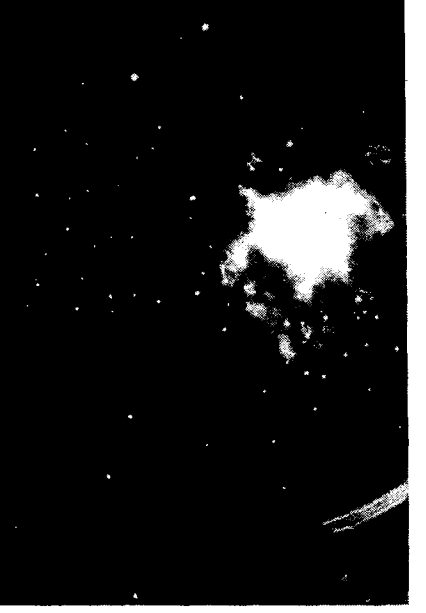

a price that's merely high. 'High' is inadequate."We're talking — " He spread his hands. "*Exalted.*"

"I realize that."

"We know a little bit about you, Mr. Rogan. We make it a policy to be informed about our customers. And your credit rating is good. But not that good. Even if you disposed of your property . . . liquidated your assets . . . even with the trade-in on what you've already purchased from us. . ."

"There must be a way."

The salesman looked at him for a time.

Finally he said, "Perhaps."

"Good," Rogan said.

"*Perhaps.* You don't understand the strictures. It would mean leaving your job. It would mean — shall we say — a radically altered life-style. Are you prepared to deal with that?"

"Yes," Rogan said. "I don't care."

"Ah. Well, then." There was the shadow of a smile. He's working on commission, Rogan thought. "Hills and Rutherford, you see, is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Loomis Technology and Resources. Our parent corporation has a model contract it offers in situations such as this. It's basically a question of reciprocity. . . ."

He did not accept at once. He felt he owed that much, at least, to Margaret.

She stared at him. He saw, involuntarily, the yellow residue that had

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accumulated at the inner angles of her eyes. Her skin was pale and porous; she was sweating.

"You'll hardly be human!"

He blinked. "That's a phylocentric attitude. I'll be the same old Ben."

"It's me, isn't it? It's because *I've* changed."

"No," he said. "This is what I want." He added, "You could have it too."

"There was a time when I was what you wanted. Me. *Just* me. I guess it was because I was young. Pretty. The best you could get. Now I'm — what? Obsolete. God, I feel so old."

She began to weep.

Rogan turned away. None of this mattered. He felt hard, cold, shiny. He knew what he wanted.

He had perhaps overlooked certain clauses and considerations in the contract. Duration, obligation, and matters of configuration. But all in all he was pleased with the results. The parts of himself he could see were sleek, efficient, and ruthlessly functional.

They shipped him to an island called Nunivak, and he descended under his own power to the Loomis T&R mines along the steep submerged slope of the Bering sea. It was a strange, lifeless place, and the job he did was repetitive: manipulating slabs of ore-bearing rock (which reminded him of enormous chunks of incoming data) in his beryllium claws. But there were others like him there, with whom he could communicate by means of sonar signals and flashing lights, and he reminded himself that he was the newest and shiniest of them all. Some — the older ones — had tarnish crawling across their carapaces like a strange disease.

Not him. He was functional. He was clean.

The years passed, however, and Rogan was as susceptible to the vulgar work of entropy as the rest. There came a time when he was slow and barnacled and his joints were prone to seizure, when he began to doubt the wisdom of the enterprise, to think with some nostalgia of the way he had been before . . . all this.

It was a temporary malaise. It ended when the new Dredger was introduced to the mines. Her name was inscribed across her prow; Rogan's eyes, though they were failing, deciphered it through the frigid gloom. He scuttled forward, crablike, wanting to weep (although he could not), crying out her name across the sonar frequencies: "Margaret, Margaret!"

She was lovely, all gleaming silver and sealed ball joints. She was state of the art. And she was his.

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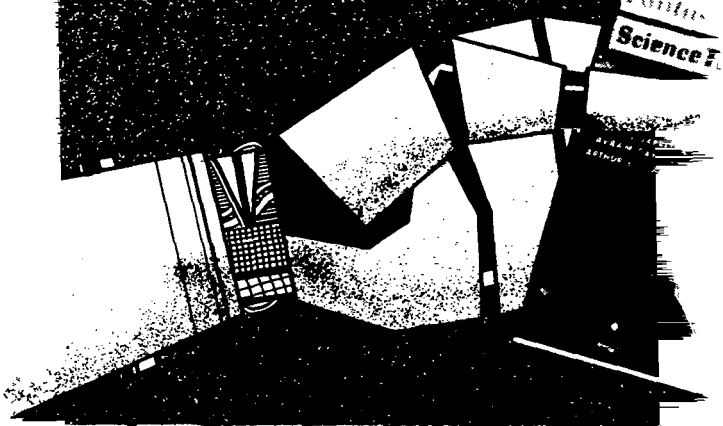

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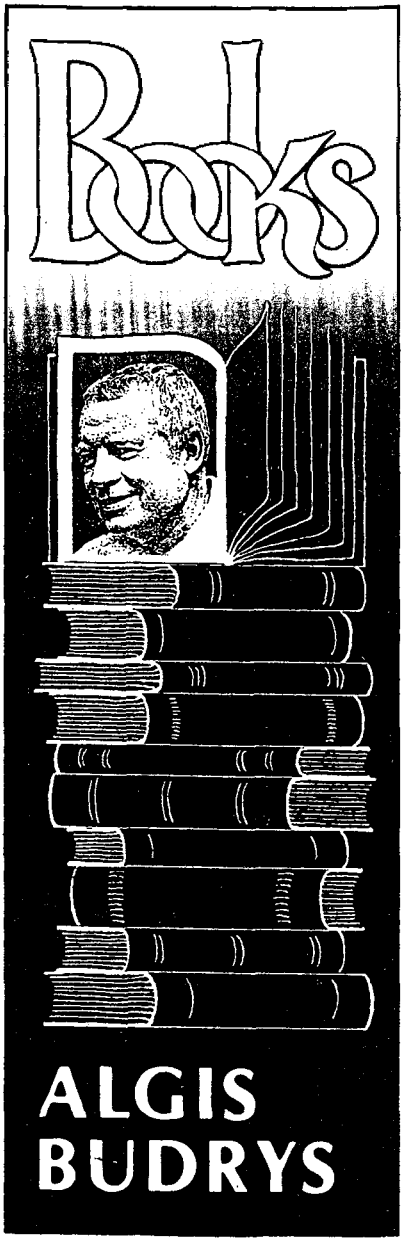

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Yesterday's Faces, Robert Sampson, (V. 1, *Glory Figures,* and V. 2, *Strange Days),* Bowling Green University Popular Press, $10.95 ea. (Trade paper)

Let me tell you about a fellow. Tell you at some length. I have my reasons:

Dick Lupoff is one of those people whose lives are wedded inextricably into the speculative fiction community. At mid-century, while pursuing a career in what was then called cybernetics, he was taking active part in SF community activities such as amateur magazine publishing and the promulgation of informal and semi-formal Fan groups which, among other things, sponsored SF conventions on the East Coast. Pat Lupoff, his wife, either was a Fan when they met or swiftly became one; together they then published one of the most influential fanzines of its day, *Xero,* which eventually won a Hugo award for excellence. In the latter 1950s and early 1960s, *Xero* and its editor-publishers served as the focus for an ongoing discussion group-*cum*-salon that readily reflected, and sometimes led, the rapidly evolving community concern with SF as a literature with broader posibilities than those being explored in the professional media.

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With credentials such as these, the Lupoffs continue to be prominent figures in Fannish activity, now in the San Francisco Bay Area, and Dick also conducts one of the very few regular SF radio shows. He is thus continuing an extensive pattern of activities whose consequences include the bringing in to the community of intelligent and talented recruits. When the roll is called up yonder at the meeting of the Parnassus chapter of the Science Fiction League, the name of Lupoff shall not be overlooked. And if Dick's going, I would like to be there too, please; seldom have I met anyone more personally likeable.

It was inevitable that as articulate and sharp a wit as Dick's would cross over into professional SF activity, and as early as 1967 Richard A. Lupoff published his first novel, at the age of thirty-two. Simultaneously, however, he was establishing himself as a leading expert on comics (co-editing a series of *Xero* articles into *All in Color For a Dime* in 1970) and on Edgar Rice Burroughs, authoring two excellent monographs, *Edgar Rice Burroughs: Master of Adventure* (1965) *and Barsoom: Edgar Rice Burroughs and the Martian Vision* (1976). He in fact pushed a Burroughs revival into existence, republishing many of the old pulp master's works via a specialty book-publishing house, Canaver Press. So he qualifies, as well, for the Long-Running You Shoulda Been Here in The Old Days company picnic Cyril Kornbluth hosts with the good delicatessen spread.

In among all this are the works of fiction, as noted. These have included a number of short stories later combined into novels, notably *Sacred Locomotive Flies* (1971), which, apart from being a whacky adventure novel, embodied his wicked series of famous-author parodies published under the name Ova Hamlet in *Fantastic* magazine.*

Over the years, the books have added up to quite a bunch. Available now in Berkley paperback are *Circumpolar!* ("Amelia Earhart, Howard Hughes and Charles Lindbergh in the Greatest Air Race of All Time!" with a cover painting of Hughes, on a mechanical Pegasus, apparently attempting to fend off Lindbergh in *The Spirit of St. Louis.*) and *Sun's End,* a space-fiction novel on the grand old scale, in which cyborg Dan Kitajima must save the Solar System in a manner out van-Vogting one of the masters of that genre.

What I am saying is that Lupoff, taken in his entirety, is metageneric. When he writes, whatever he writes, he writes about icons and incunabula. Being witty and powerfully analytical, he has fileted out any number of generic aspects of SF and can duplicate any number of styles of plotting as well as of prose. This he often

For specific dates throughout here, and some of the other data, I'm indebted to Peter Nicholl's Science Fiction Encyclopedia.

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does, and although, as in *Sun's End,* this facility is sometimes simply put to the service of creating a (more or less) straightforward work of fiction, it seems clear that he places a higher value on work of the sort typified by his ambitious and impressive new hardcover work, *Lovecraft's Book.*

Lovecraft's Book is about the time that George Sylvester Viereck, slimy agent for a burgeoning German nationalism, almost got Howard Philips Lovecraft to write an American *Mein Kampf.* Only the patriotic deeds of Harry Houdini's smarter brother, plus the intervention of Italian bootleggers and several fortuitous acts of Providence, prevented that as well as the Prohibition-era Nazi invasion of America from underwater staging bases surreptitiously constructed at the entrances to all major U.S. harbors.

Plied with verisimilitudinous detail and sober assertions of historical research and painstaking scholarship, this confection owes something to the tradition of the life-on-the-Moon hoax as published on the news pages of the New York *Sun* in 1835. As designed and produced by Arkham house, this makes up into a very pretty book indeed, with a nice selection of photographs lending a documentary atmosphere not much marred by the retoucher's brush. With considerable similar attention to prose detail, Lupoff cycles Lovecraft through a succession of encounters with Viereck and a number of other real German nationalist operatives active in the late 1920s. Lupoff also postulates a German-financed master plan for melding all of America's native fascistic organizations into a concerted effort also including Russian emigré fascists, the Mussolini-backed Blackshirt front, and what would become the German-American Bund. So he's also able to bring in his impressively researched catalogue of the sometimes ludicrous but never less than frightening personalities who hectically haunted the American political scene in those rococo days.

For lagniappe, Lupoff gives us extended glimpses of such Lovecraft associates as Frank Belknap Long, Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard and Vincent Starrett, all of whom HPL at some point enlists in an effort to grasp Viereck's motives.

So the icons march past, as do the evocative machines — the Baird device for seeing at night, the Burgess biplane, the milk-can escape trick, the ground plan for an *unterwasserprojekt* secret base, stamped *Geheim* — some of them backed up by photographs. It's a while before one notices that Lupoff is also using something like 1920s pulp plotting; that is, the various scenes of peril and intrigue don't necessarily cohere into any systematic series of events, and there are loose ends a-plenty. For instance, we never learn just how Clark Ashton Smith was removed from the scene after the synagogue-raiding German sea-

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men clubbed him senseless in San Francisco. And the last lines of the book, while actually making no sense, are a sort of a sop to the reader's wondering just what the opening scene had to do with anything.

The plotting in fact reminds me of *Doc Savage* more than of anything from Lovecraft's heyday...There's the opening scene whose sole purpose is to grab the reader by the throat, and then there's the introduction of the sometimes shaky main premise. On the latter are hung what are in effect autonomous scenes, each milked for whatever effects of suspense can be created. Sometimes, the need to make these appendages interesting puts warps in the premise, so that by the time you approach the end, the story may be well over to one side of where it started for, as indeed this one is. Some of that is palpably deliberate here, and results in charming effects as when Lovecraft the cerebrating recluse briefly becomes a pulp action hero. Not all of it works that well. None of it is as effective as the subtle, thoroughly modern sub-plot about Theo Weiss and Sonia Lovecraft, which with great economy speaks volumes.

The problem here is that there's no way of knowing where Lupoff falls short of his own intentions. For specific instance, the physics and engineering of his diving sequences are all at least questionable, and where presented in detail, usually outright wrong. But is it this Lupoff failing to do some fairly easy research (!), or is it Lupoff cannily imitating the old pulpsters who characteristically never looked anything up and blew smoke over the thin spots? This, again, is not the way of HPL, although his greatest contemporary, Abe Merritt, made up just about every work of the "science" in his stories. Is Lupoff being obtuse to Lovecraft's creative processes when he asks us to believe that *Weird Shadow Over Innsmouth* was inspired by HPL's participating in the destruction of the *underwasserprojekt* in Marblehead Harbor, or is he having his little joke? I think I know which, but there's no way I could tell by reading the text alone.

So in some ways — since this aspect is characteristic of all metageneric work, certainly including Lin Carter's and Philip José Farmer's — this is not fully professional writing because its author has hedged against the full effect of professional risks. He is witty, clever, and often clearly meticulous, but there is some sense that he has not hung it all out.

Hanging it all out is not an invariant requirement. Furthermore, there is no way we could have had this entertaining and, in *fine*, engaging book, if Lupoff had not been willing to dare the other set of risks, which is to suffer the sort of criticism set forth above. It incidentally illustrates some of the traps that occur when you can't tell where the prose furnishings of scholarship are employed in the serv-

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ice of data-gathering and where they blow smoke, intentionally or otherwise. But we will be getting deeper into that in a moment. Meanwhile, returning to Lupoff's intention, the answer to your question is No, of course not — Germany in the 1920s in no way had the resources or the organization to mount any such sort of physical effort, and its ideological battles were fought on a piecemeal freelance basis, usually by second-rater poseurs like Viereck. As Lupoff depicts, those people were usually more of an embarrassment than anything else.

Sam Moskowitz — I say this up front, though I would not willingly injure him or his publisher as individuals — over the years has produced repeated instances of scholarly error. He gets his facts wrong with some regularity, which we all do, but Sam is foremost among us in asserting that he *doesn't* get his facts wrong, and that his scholarship is impeccable. When called on this, he very rarely accedes, and never gracefully. And this is all aside from the fact that even when he has his facts as right as cross-checking can make them — which is a hefty percentage of the time, as it should be — the conclusions he draws are often not defensible. Some of them amuse observers.*

To conclude this preamble to my review of Sam's latest book, it may also be of significance to note that, as you can deduce from my footnote, Sam and I almost invariably draw far different insights from the same datum. Any number of other observers over the years have disagreed with him along those lines, and he has usually shouted them down, literally or figuratively. Sometimes he has been in the right. Rarely has there been as much light cast as heat.

I say all this because in library after library, Sam Moskowitz is, as self-described, the foremost modern science fiction historian. The books pertaining to the precursors, the development and the further evolution of science fiction in our time are apt to be his, and they are by now a very large bulking of questionable conclusion and not unimpeccable assertion. To these, one must now add *A. Merritt: Reflections in the Moon Pool.*

And like all the rest of them, it is

**In his anthology,* Science Fiction by Gaslight, *Moskowitz asserts that in a nineteenth-century short story, "The Land Ironclads," H.G. Wells predicted the battle tank with its endless-belt treads. The relevant passage in the story Moskowitz then reprints proves conclusively that Wells equipped his machines with feet. This is a typical instance of Moskowitz digging up real data not readily accessible to others and then assertively misinterpreting it. Since Da Vinci predicted as much of a tank as Wells did, the significance of the story is not in its visionary engineering, an aspect that always impresses Moskowitz. It's in its dead-accurate sociology, a discipline with which Sam is less comfortable, not often seeing it as being anywhere near the core of SF's appeal and/or ultimate worth.*

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invaluable. Because Sam is indefatigable. Though he asserts that the present volume omits some Merritt marginalia, that has to be a couple of laundry lists and a note to the milkman. I cannot imagine anyone else — not me, not some hungry post-doc with the grant of a lifetime — running down all this data. Sam's muse is Plethora, and he loves her.

As presented here in a very well-made book from Oswald Train, First-Fandom member, earnest stalwart of the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society when the Ozzie Trains and the Sam Moskowitzs were the only people who upheld SF against a brutally uncaring world, what we have is a Moskowitz biography of Merritt, plus some hitherto unpublished or rarely published complete pieces of fiction and poetry, plus a number of variously intriguing story fragments and self-explanation by Merritt, plus reminiscences and essays by several relevant people, plus a striking photo section. If you are going to study Merritt at all, this is without question forevermore the place to start. The address is Oswald Train: Publisher, Box 1891, Philadelphia, PA 19105, and the retail price is $20.00, a bargain for a book that is designed to be permanently useful, physically and with respect to content.

Why would you want to study Merritt, who despite green memories is today a pretty obscure writer? Well, if you had ever read *The Ship of Ishtar* at about the age of twelve, as I did, you would not have to ask . . . and *Ship* is not considered his best work. His characteristic triumph was his first — the two "Moon Pool" stories that were combined into a book (when books from genre SF serials were vanishingly rare) — and though he never wrote very much, he was like a fresh thunderclap every time a new book did appear. His influence poured over just about every young writer whose style Lovecraft had left uncorrupted. Between the two of them, they feverishly purveyed adjectives, promulgated pseudosciences, catered to ignorance and prejudice of every conceivable sort, and, each in his own way, made lurid the dreams of adolescence. HPL, of course, was straight-laced and reserved except when describing something coming at you from out of the baseboard. Merritt's imaginagion tended toward a franker lubricity. In neither case are we dealing with a sophisticate of letters or with a conscientious practitioner of understatement. It doesn't matter.

In my opinion, this book, like all Moskowitz books, is full of places where the data as given do not support the conclusions. You might find yourself agreeing with me on that point; do not let that becloud your appreciation for the sheer labor and love that went into this work, and do not throw out the information with the bathwater. If it's up to the usual

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standard, not all of it is utterly reliable, despite Sam's protestations, but it's no worse than anyone elses's and there's more of it by a factor of five or ten.

Why does he do it? Why does Moskowitz persist? Because, like Lupoff, he is a solid citizen of the community.

I would have told you as much about Moskowitz as about Lupoff if Sam and I were as much contemporaries, and it would have come out sounding much the same; these two diverse men, and I, are brothers. Another candidate is Robert Sampson, a charming person about whom I know practically nothing except that he was Fan Guest of Honor at 1985's DeepSouthCon, where I first met him, and that he has researched and written two indispensable reference books on the pulps and pulp characteristics under the main title of *Yesterday's Faces.* Written in a style much lighter than Moskowitz's, more Gee Whiz then Lupoff's, Sampson's prose revels in the reading of his youth. *Glory Figures* is about possibily all the more "conventional" series heroes, including one I never thought to hear spoken of again, "Cleek" of Scotland Yard with his malleable face. Without question, Sampson's is not simply a scholarly accomplishment, and its reward is not in kudos, tenure, or pelf, though it deserves all three in plenty. I have the impression that despite the necessary brevity with which he summarizes each of the scores of heroes who once had us panting for our regular fix, he sums them up adroitly. I can't think of any other single source for any and all of this. The man's a genius.

It's in *Strange Days* that he really gets down to it — the "occult detectives," the Tarzan-apers including Ki-Gor (though he fails to dwell on the strong streak of occultism that served Ki-Gor as just about the only distinction from Tarzan), the "science detectives" like Doc Savage, and, of course, the super-science heroes, though I searched both indices in vain for Terrence S. O'Leary and his Dyno-Blaster. Well, even Sam nods.

The total retail cost of these books is $57.85. With them, you have about as complete a picture of an age and its popular literature as anyone could need for almost any purpose. And not a word of it, graceful or not, could have been hired into existence. Nobody does this kind of work for the money; nobody who was sent to do it would be qualified, since the first qualification is not to be able to not do it.

It is with considerable pride in my community that I recommend these works, and, despite my reservations, recommend them unreservedly. If you are hip to how I mean that, chances are you already own them all.

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Stephen Gallagher's latest is a suspenseful thriller about a radio newscaster and a terrifying New Year's Eve . . .

To Dance by the Light of the Moon

BY
STEPHEN GALLAGHER

t eleven o'clock on New Year's Eve, Mercedes Medina read the news.

She was the only newsroom staffer on the station at this hour, and so the bulletin was no more than an update from the IRN Teletype: she was off the air at three minutes past, the red light in the news studio dying as the all-night DJ pulled the sound fader out. Mercedes could see him through the double-thickness window along with his tech operator, Derek, who'd got his chair tipped right back against the wall by the door. As she stood, Derek rocked forward and signaled to show that he wanted to speak to her; so she mimed holding a coffee cup, and then she went out.

There was an empty-office silence out in the corridor, and the musty-new smell of carpets recently relaid. Mercedes had been with the radio station since its second year of operation, when money had been tight and everything had been run on a shoestring, and she wasn't sure that she liked the new image that the place was now taking on. It had all started to happen when they'd swung into profit; everybody started getting more image-conscious with the next round of franchise competition only two years away, because in a field where most people were newcomers there was an edge to be gained in becoming the Establishment as quickly as possible.

Everything considered, Mercedes didn't like the new situation much. But she doubted that she'd be saying so.

She stepped into a small room beside the promotions office. It had one low vinyl settee, a drink machine, a food machine, and one bag-lined

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wastebin. Mercedes dialed the code number for a black coffee, and decided to stick at that because the drinks were free while the crisps and snacks weren't. The second machine also had a habit, seemingly inherited from its predecessor that had been around the corner before the big overhaul, of keeping money and delivering nothing — a tendency that had earned it the nickname of the Diet Machine.

"Had someone on the line for you before," Derek said from behind her as a cup dropped and something that would (she hoped) be coffee started to run. "I told her to ring you back."

Mercedes turned. Derek was unbelievably tall, around six four, and unbelievably thin. His sweatshirt sleeves had been rolled back to show arms that looked as if they'd just been cut out of plaster casts.

She said, "When was this?"

"Just as you were getting ready to go on-air. She said she'd call you on the newsroom line right after the bulletin."

"You didn't give her the number, did you?"

Derek held up his hands in a kind of defense. "Not me," he said. "She already had it, but don't ask me how. You going to talk to her?"

Mercedes half-shrugged. "What was it about?"

"Could be a hot tip. Deep Throat stuff, you know."

"Yeah, I bet," Mercedes said disbelievingly, and she bent to raise the machine's Perspex gate and take out her coffee. It seemed to be more or less what she'd wanted, not counting the slight odor of chicken soup. "What's happening at your end?"

"Don's usual bunch of rough schoolgirls are due to arrive anytime now. He's put on something long and slow so that he can run down and let them in." Something long and slow, in this case, meant an album track that would play to an empty studio during the time that it took for the DJ to race down to the ground-level fire door where his friends/associates/hangers-on would be waiting. Don's taste seemed to be for noisy, knowing, underage girls. Derek shook his head and said, "I don't know where he finds them."

"*I* don't know how he gets away with it."

"Only because the ones with the big tits get passed along to the boss. You think if I had a perm and got some tinted glasses, I'd have the same kind of luck?"

"No," Mercedes told him as she shouldered the door open to leave. "Those are just accessories. It's the basics you're missing."

"Like what?"

"A total lack of discrimination, and an ego bigger than a telephone box. See you later."

Derek held the door as she slid through it, her cup in one hand and the yellow flimsies of the eleven

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o'clock bulletin in the other; and then, as she started off down the empty corridor toward the newsroom, he called, "Hey, Mercedes!"

She turned to look back; he was still in the doorway, a huge stick-insect less than a year out of college, mousy-haired and with something that, in better light, might have been the beginnings of a beard. He said, "In case you're busy. Happy New Year."

"I'll be seeing you at midnight," she told him, and walked on.

The newsroom corridor was low-lit and silent, and windowless like the rest of the complex. In the background was the murmur of the late-night show being relayed through corridor speakers turned as low as they would go. The station was in a tiny corner of a huge plaza of shops, offices, a multi-level car park, and a high-rise hotel; at this time, when all of the office staff had gone home and there were barely more than a handful of people in the entire building, it was possible to detect a once-a-minute vibration that rumbled through the floors and the walls as if the whole plaza structure were in tune with the deep heartbeat of the city.

The phone had started to ring even before she was through the door; half-hoping that it might cut out before she had to answer it, she went over to the big table that ran down the middle of the room and put the bulletin sheets on the spike for the office junior to sort out and file in the morning. Over by the window, the IRN Teletype was already hammering out updates for the midnight news; the full-length glass behind it looked out into the main concourse of the darkened plaza, a goldfish-bowl effect that all the staffers hated because of the crowds of kids who gathered in the afternoons to gape and to tap on the glass as if they were trying to wake the lizards in the reptile house. Now Mercedes saw only herself, a half-real reflection in a room that was a mess of half-read old newspapers, dead press kits, and stacks of directories; a ghost-girl that stared back at her, the skin of a dusty olive and hair of the blackest jet.

And the phone was still ringing.

She hitched herself onto the side of the desk and moved aside somebody's discarded pullover to reach the receiver. "Hello?" she said cautiously, expecting to find herself landed with some long and involved message for one of the other staffers. They weren't supposed to give out this unlisted number for personal use, but they all did it.

"They said to call back," a woman's voice said. It was a terrible line. "Can you talk to me now?"

"How did you get hold of this number?" Mercedes said. Not a message for someone else, after all; her interest began to warm a little.

"That doesn't matter. What I need to know is, can I trust you?"

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"That depends. What are you going to tell me?"

"You're recording this," the woman said suspiciously.

"We don't record calls. We're just a small station and this is just an ordinary phone. Is it something you've done?"

"No. But I know someone who has."

"Tell me about it," Mercedes said. "Perhaps I can help." Or perhaps you're just going to waste my time as you try to make trouble for somebody you've decided deserves it; and then you won't give me your name, and then I'll forget all about it. She lowered herself into one of the well-worn typists' chairs and reached for a noteblock. Just in case.

"It's about that girl," the woman's voice said. "The student who was killed. You did a story on her last week, and tonight you said that the police aren't getting anywhere. Well, I know the person who did it."

Mercedes was bolt-upright now, looking desperately around for the portable UHER recorder that was supposed to be kept on permanent standby in the office. Either it was buried under the rubbish somewhere, or else someone had taken it home. "Do the police know about this?" she said, swearing to herself that she'd find whoever was responsible first thing in the morning and dig out selected internal organs with a rusty fork.

"I can't trust the police," the woman's voice said. "The question is, can I trust you?"

"Yes, you can," Mercedes said firmly. "I've never let down a source yet." Or even had a source worth letting down, she thought as she hitched the chair in close to the table and started to jot down verbatim everything that had been said so far. "What's his name?"

"I can't tell you that. He's someone close and it would come back to me, you see what I mean? He needs to be caught, I think he even wants it. But he mustn't ever know that I had anything to do with it."

"Is he your boyfriend? Your husband?"

"I'm going to hang up," the voice threatened, and Mercedes scrambled to give reassurance.

"Wait wait wait," she said. "All right. I'm not going to push you. But with something like this, you get calls from all kinds of people and they aren't always 100 percent genuine. Now, I'm not suggesting that this means you . . . but you see my problem? You've got to give me something I can show around. I'm talking about credibility."

A breath. Then: "She was wearing powder-blue underclothes. A matching set. He took a piece away with him."

"O.K.," Mercedes said, soothingly, as if a big hurdle had just been overcome here. The truth of it was that she had no idea whether the informa-

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tion was accurate or not; the body had been discovered only half a mile away across the city center and she'd been the first of the press to reach the scene, but the actual information that she'd received from the investigating officers had been the same as that in the official release. The important thing was that her caller didn't know this; and if the detail was as genuine as it sounded, it already gave her an edge on the competition.

Big time, here I come, she thought, and prepared to apply the squeeze. "So you're not giving me your name," she said, "you're not giving me *his* name, you won't even say what your relationship to him is. Why exactly are we talking here?"

"I told you, he *needs* to get caught. I know he left things, and the police didn't even see them."

It really was a lousy line; and the woman seemed to be trying to disguise her voice as well, which didn't help. Mercedes said, "What do you mean, *things*? You mean clues?"

"He even wrote on the wall, right there where it happened, and they didn't even *see* it. They probably thought it was kids. You could make them listen, though."

"And what exactly did he write?" An even darker possibility occurred to Mercedes. "Were you *with* him?"

"I've got to go."

"No, I didn't mean . . . "

"He's coming. He'll hear me."

"Well, let's work out some way that we can talk again . . ." she began, but she was wasting her time; the line had already gone dead.

Mercedes hung up; gently, reverently, as if the receiver were of thin glass and filled with gold dust. And then, alone in the newsroom with just the quiet clatter of the Teletype as background, she took a moment to think.

She knew as well as anybody the dangers of believing in hoax calls in a case like this. That would be how she'd have to treat it, until she knew better; but it was the detail about the powder-blue underwear that already had her halfway convinced. She couldn't confirm it, but it hadn't sounded like an off-the-cuff invention. Now, to keep it 100 percent legal and by the book, she ought to call the police and tell them what she had.

Which meant that they'd move in and take over. And what would *she* get out of it? She was the one who'd been singled out for the call, hadn't she?

By the clock on the wall, she had forty-five minutes before her next on-air appearance. She started to move.

First she dug out the contract list and phoned out for a taxi to meet her out in front of the plaza right away. She knew that they'd all be busy so late on the eve of the New Year, but she also knew that contract work took precedence over casual bookings and that they'd probably bounce back some party pickup for a half

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hour or so in order to fit her in. Then she went around all the desks, opening their drawers and looking for any kind of torch or flashlight; she found one belonging to Bob King — it was in with the rest of his stuff, anyway, amongst the pens and the stale cough drops and his dirty-book collection — and she took it out and checked it. It wasn't much, just a cheap plastic thing running off a couple of pen cells, but the batteries were good and it would be better than nothing. Then she took her heavy winter coat from its hook behind the door and put it on.

She was in the middle of winding her long scarf around her neck when the phone rang again.

She almost strangled herself in her haste to answer it this time, snagging her scarf on the door handle and jerking herself up short; she snatched up the receiver and said a breathless, "Hello?" — but all that she could hear was the electronic echo of her own voice on a dead line.

After waiting awhile and hearing nothing, she hung up.

Don's regular soiree — cheap wine as well as cheap women — would probably be well under way by now, and since Mercedes didn't want to interrupt or even to get too close, she decided to call Derek via the talkback system from the adjacent news studio. She stood in the narrow booth and leaned across the microphone to the talkback switch; "Derek?" she said, and through the soundproofed glass she saw his attention snap around to her. He'd been sitting with his chair tilted back against the studio wall again, well apart from Don and his friends and with his face a careful mask of nothing. The main desk was out of the line of sight from where she was standing, but she could see a reflection in the window of the music studio opposite; Don was sitting with one of the girls on his knee, showing her how to run the desk and how to trigger the sequence of loaded cartridges for the commercial break. Mercedes wouldn't have cared to guess exactly how young the girl was, but she made Don look *very* old.

Mercedes told Derek, "I'm going out for half an hour to check on a late story. I'll be back in time for the midnight bulletin. I'll ring you from the box outside to let me in, O.K.?"

Derek signalled O.K. through the glass, but otherwise he didn't move. Nobody else paid any attention. She felt sorry for him; he could get up and wander around the empty station every now and again, but his job required him to base himself in the main studio to act as technical troubleshooter on the show and to handle the incoming calls when the DJ decided to open up the lines for requests or a competition. There was nothing much more for him to be doing at the moment other than to sit as witness to the spectacle of a middle-aged man trying to camp it up like

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some juvenile stud.

Mercedes left them to it. She had forty minutes left, or half an hour in realistic terms, because she'd still have to time and prepare the next bulletin when she got back. She hurried down the whisper-quiet corridor, past the managing director's office and the sales suite, and let herself out through the door that was the boundary between the private working areas of the station and the public-access, public-arena zone of the foyer. People could come in here from the plaza to drop off requests, pick up station merchandise, or get signed photographs of the presenters; they came through an outer glass door that could be unlocked only by remote control from behind the receptionist's counter, so that the worst of the weirdies could be kept at bay. The counter was unmanned now, the small switchboard lit up and locked through to an answering machine. Once out of the foyer, she'd be effectively sealed out of the station until Derek emerged in response to her call to let her in.

Stepping out through the door into the chill of the big enclosed mall, Mercedes was thinking ahead. The first and most obvious scenario that had come into her mind — apart from that of the whole thing being a motiveless hoax — had been one in which the sicko who'd killed the student persuaded an accomplice to phone and set up his next victim for him. But what did they think she'd do, walk the half mile alone in the middle of the night? As she moved out past the boarded gaps of the plaza's unsold shop units, she made a firm decision that she wasn't even going to step out of the locked cab if she could help it.

There was almost no light out here, but she was sure of her way; at the far end of the mall stood a half-hearted attempt at an indoor garden, and beyond that a bank of escalators that would take her down to ground level. The escalators wouldn't actually be running at this time, but there was rarely more than one of them in service, anyway. At the bottom, an outward-opening fire door would let her out into the plaza's service road where her taxi would be waiting. Derek would have to make the same trek, remembering to wedge open the foyer door with a chair on his way out, in order to readmit her. It was an informal system and something of a pain, but what else could they do? The high number of unlet units in the plaza meant that the management couldn't afford round-the-clock security. They were lucky if they got a nightly visit from a man and a dog.

The contract minicab was waiting outside, its engine running and its headlights steaming faintly in the cold. Mercedes recognized the driver, who'd picked her up several times to run her home after night shifts; the big sedan was his own, its seats shiny

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and worn and the side pockets stuffed with coloring books and other children's debris. She settled gratefully into the back, the warmth of the heater already seeping into her as they rolled out of the alley and into the main street before the plaza.

"Where to?" he said. "Home so early?" But she said no, and gave him the first direction that would take them through an area of old warehouses and old pubs and nightclubs that changed names and nominal owners every few months. Gradually the pubs would get rougher and rougher, and more of the warehouses would be standing empty, and then, finally, true dereliction would take over.

What a place to die, she thought. The last sight your eyes ever see.

"You have a good Christmas?" the driver said over his shoulder, which brought her attention back to the present.

"Working for most of it," she said. "Was O.K., though."

"Yeah, me, too. To be honest, I don't mind it. Glad to be out for a bit. Couldn't move in our house without getting a frisbee in your ear."

The driver lapsed into silence again, and Mercedes sat back. The urban landscape outside was already beginning to deteriorate; the suppressed excitement of all those New Year's parties boiling away behind steamy lit windows was starting to thin out and disappear, giving way to the blind shells of Victorian buildings marked for demolition and, with increasing frequency, open tracts of wasteland where demolition had already begun.

They called it an Enterprise Zone; there was a big hoarding, or billboard, somewhere around here to say so, a desperate sign of a too-late attempt at renewal. The businesses that were supposed to be forced to relocate in the city center developments had somehow dropped out of sight along the way, scared off by the high rents and the overheads. And now this . . . a nineteen-year-old girl, student at the Poly, fan of Branski Beat and Spandau Ballet, smashed over the head with a length of railing and her already dead body dragged into an empty side street to be stripped, stabbed, and slashed twenty-three times, and then partly re-dressed and covered over with her own coat. Or maybe this wasn't the kind of enterprise that they'd had in mind.

Mercedes now leaned forward again; the first turnoff was coming up soon, and a number of the sodium lights along the road were either out or else giving the dull cherry glow of a failed element. "Here it is," she said; and she could sense the driver's sudden confusion as they made the turn and the saloon's headlight beams swept across a cobbled street that was strewn with rubbish.

"Isn't this where they found that kid?" he said, slowing and watching

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for anything that might rip at the tires. The carcass of a thirty-year-old washing machine lay on its side in the road, rusty works spilled all around it.

"This is the place," Mercedes confirmed. She'd seen it only in daylight before, and hadn't thought that it could look any worse than it did then; but it was possible, she had to concede, it was definitely possible.

"You're not getting out here, are you?"

"Not if I can help it. Can you just cruise down slowly with your lights full on?"

It was a slow, careful, bumpy ride over bricks and glass and rotten timber. The houses on either side were roofless shells, sometimes with entire walls pulled out so that the upper stories hung in midair. Mercedes was watching the shadow play of light over brickwork, watching for the evidence that she'd been led along here to see; she wasn't entirely sure of where she ought to be until they passed a couple of plastic traffic cones and some flapping shreds of barrier tape that had marked the sealed-off zone of a careful police search. Suddenly she could see it, that gray morning reconstructing itself in her mind.

"Just stop here," she said, "for two seconds. And whatever you do, don't go away."

"Roger-dodger," the driver agreed as the saloon came to a halt, and Mercedes got out.

She shivered in the night chill after the warmth of the car. But there was more to it than that; evil still lay over this place like a radiant imprint slow to fade. She could sense it, read it, feel its touch. The tiny pen cell beam stabbed out into the darkness. There was the spot where the dead girl had been lying, a second tarpaulin cover over her to keep off the rain but unable to stop the blood from washing out underneath; and here was the place where Mercedes had been standing, shakily recounting her impression into the UHER's microphone until the officer from the Community Affairs Division had firmly guided her away as the screens had been brought in. It had all gone out, virtually uncut, the officer's words included.

She ran the light over the walls, looking for writing. There was a spray-canned GAZ in four-foot letters, but it was old and already starting to flake away. Nothing else. Picking her way carefully over the rough ground, she went over for a closer check.

Halfway there, she glanced back at the taxi for reassurance. The interior light was on, her beacon of safety and retreat, but it seemed much farther away than the few steps she'd taken. *Shape up*, she told herself, and moved on.

Her first impression had been right; there was nothing written on any of the walls, anywhere, that looked either recent or meaningful.

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She was about to turn and head back to the cab when the figure in the corner raised its head and stared at her.

It was sitting, shapeless and slumped like a tramp, and it moved with a stiff, crackling sound like a dead bird's wing. The head came up and two dim, spit-colored eyes blinked as if coming awake; they lingered on her for a moment as if recognizing and remembering, and then the head slowly lowered and the eyes were gone. Mercedes turned the light toward it so fast that she almost dropped the torch.

What she saw was two black plastic trash bags, stuffed and loosely knotted and piled one on top of the other. The topmost bag had come undone, perhaps pulled open by some scavenging dog. As she watched, the breeze lifted a fold of the plastic like a sail.

She took a deep breath, and tried to will her hammering heart back to something like normal rhythm. But her heart didn't want to know, and Mercedes had to concede that it was probably right. She turned her back on the scene and made straight for her transport.

By the time they were rolling out of the far end of the derelict street and turning back toward the main road, most of her panic had turned to anger. She was cold, she'd been scared, she'd probably messed up her boots. The driver said, "Find what you were looking for?"

"Different kind of evidence," Mercedes said.

"Oh, yeah? What of?"

"The fact that there are people out there with a pretty sick idea of what makes a joke. Fast as you can, will you? I've got another bulletin at midnight."

"Yeah, midnight," the driver said with a trace of despondence as the streetlights came back into view. "Another year gone, and nothing to show for it."

There was more life around here; some of the houses had been taken over by squatters before the vandals moved in, and even a couple of shops had managed to stay open. Beyond them were the outer ring towerblocks, distant grid-patterns of colored stars against the night sky. The buses stopped running to them at eleven; that was why the girl had been walking home, because somebody who'd promised her a lift back from a party had disappeared and she didn't have the money for a taxi.

"You were there, weren't you?" the driver said, breaking into her thoughts. It was like he'd just come up with something that he hadn't expected to remember.

"Not when they found her," Mercedes said.

"But you did all those interviews straight after."

"Yes. They went out on the network."

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"So did you see the body, or what?"

Mercedes looked out of the side window at the passing traffic. "They'd covered it up by the time I got there," she said.

The cabdriver was shaking his head. She saw his eyes as he glanced in his mirror, but he wasn't looking at her. "What makes somebody *do* something like that?" he said. "To a kid, as well?"

"I can't tell you."

"I mean, you see some of them . . . whenever there's a trial, the papers dig out their wedding photographs or whatever. And they're just ordinary blokes — you'd pass 'em in the street and you wouldn't even know. So where does it come from? Is it supposed to be in everybody, or what? Because I'm bloody sure it isn't in *me*."

"Well, Mercedes said, "we used to be able to talk about evil. But somehow it went out of fashion."

"Yeah, I know. Couldn't come up with anything to replace it, though, could they?"

She checked her watch. Fifteen minutes to the hour. This was going to be one hell of a tight squeeze, and all over a hoax. The plaza was coming into sight now, the dark mass of the shopping mall topped by the linked tower of the hotel; they floodlit the hotel at night, giving its concrete a warm glow that it didn't have in the day. A couple of minutes, and she'd be there.

In the meantime, she was still thinking about evil. She'd been thinking about it a lot in the past few days. She hadn't exactly led a sheltered life, but that morning's visit to the murder scene had been her first exposure to the afterpresence of something awesome and real. That evening, when she should have been out celebrating her first major-league report, she'd sat at home in her studio apartment and begun to shake so much that she finally had to go and throw up in the basin. She felt tainted, she felt scared. She'd seen it in the faces of the detectives, that they were in the presence of an old, old enemy, and she now had the sense that she was an unwilling member of their circle.

The nearest thing that she'd ever known to it had been about seven years before, when she was still living at home. The house next door had been broken into and vandalized, everything thrown around and furniture smashed. Nothing had happened to their own place, but a shadow had passed over and changed all that it touched. What she sensed now was something even worse: the passage of a malign intelligence, something whose agents had names and lives and family backgrounds, but which simply drew them on as a temporary human skin to carry out its work.

She'd sensed it, all right. And what now made it worse was that she felt that *it* had sensed *her*.

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She had the taxi drop her by the phone booth at the front of the plaza. There was nobody in it, which was a piece of luck.

"All seems a bit dead," the taxi driver said doubtfully. "Is this O.K. for you?"

"I'll ring from here and somebody will come down to let me in," Mercedes assured him. "I'll be fine. You go on."

He nodded, and reached under the dash for his radio mike to report in. Contract rides never tipped, Mercedes knew, and her excursion had probably cut into his sideline earnings for the night. "Happy New Year," he said, and as she slammed the rear door she said, "Same to you."

She was already in the booth as he was driving away.

She dialed the studio's unlisted number. It was engaged. So was the newsroom number, which would have flashed a telltale in the news studio that Derek would have been able to see. In desperation she tried the request line, and hung up when she heard the beginning of the usual recorded message.

What were they *doing* up there? Didn't they know that she had to be on the air in — she checked her watch — just under ten minutes? To miss the broadcast would be the absolute pits of unprofessionalism, whatever the reason . . . and the reason she had wasn't even a good one. She tried the studio number again, once, for luck, but her luck was out.

Mercedes stepped from the booth and started toward the service road at the side of the plaza, half walking and half running. The pavement was a mess of grit and sand from a solitary and short-lived snowfall a couple of weeks before. Her only option was to try the door that she'd left by, to hope perhaps that Derek was already down there and waiting for her.

The service road itself was hardly more than a concrete alley, lit by a single bulb at its end and crowded with the hulking shadows of wheeled trash hoppers. She ran flat out, skidding and almost falling when she hit some sodden cardboard that had lain in the road for so long that it had grayed down to its color. She was half expecting, half hoping for Derek to step out of the shadows and wave her in; but he didn't and she arrived at the doorway panting and angry and completely at a loss for what to do next.

There was no official procedure for something like this. Nobody was supposed to enter or leave the plaza until the morning security shift clocked in at 5:00 A.M.; for any emergencies, the station crew was supposed to call a keyholder. Why couldn't she simply have passed the hoax message along to the police, as she undoubtedly was going to be told that she should have? Off-the-record approval might have been given if her information had turned out to be

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worthwhile, but she didn't even have that to look forward to.

Less than five minutes to go. Even if she went back to the phone and tried again, she still wouldn't make it. An hour ago she'd been a competent professional on top of her job; now she was feeling like a child again, sick and awed as she realized too late that simple events were running quickly out of her control.

Shivering and unhappy, she leaned on the door.

It gave silently inward.

She clattered up the dark escalator, slowed by the unfamiliar pitch of its motionless steps. God, the timing of this was going to be tight! She couldn't even hope to grab a spare minute by cheating with the clock as she'd done at least once before on the graveyard shift, probably setting a few people rattling their quartz-crystal watches in puzzlement. This would be the one night of the year when everybody was counting down to midnight. Once inside the station, she'd have no time to do anything more than grab the eleven o'clock bulletin from the spike and repeat it.

There was the warm light of the foyer, a small pocket of welcome over in the far corner of a vast space of darkness. Her footsteps echoed flatly on the ridged plastic floor; the distance seemed to stretch even as she covered it, almost as if she were flying nowhere in a bad dream. She didn't dare to check the time again, but it must be down to under a couple of minutes. Don was probably getting ready to read out the teletype himself. Don was a lousy newsreader, even worse than he was a DJ.

Mercedes almost slammed into the glass door. It didn't give.

She tried again in disbelief, but it was definitely locked. She pressed the buzzer a couple of times to get Derek's attention, and then she backed off, hopping nervously from one foot to another like a duck on a hot plate, ready to go and animated by her frustration. As she waited, she moved along to take a look in through the newsroom window. She'd have bet anything that Don had been encouraging his schoolgirls to call up all their friends on the company phones. Looking through glass that was smeary with the prints of the noses and hands of daytime spectators — they called the newsroom the only zoo around where the animals were all on the outside — Mercedes saw nobody. The newsroom was as she'd left it.

So where was Derek? She moved back to the foyer and, as she tried the buzzer again, saw the sweep hand of the reception clock covering the last half minute to the hour. She started to pump the button, wondering if it was working at all; it should be sounding right down in the studio corridor, and surely Derek would be listening for it. She put her ear to the glass, holding the button down as

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hard as she could; but she didn't hear any faint and far-off bell, just the muted sounds of the late-night music show on the reception speakers that couldn't be turned off. The track faded, and the drumroll jingle that always heralded the start of the news began.

The news at midnight, she heard the heavily processed recording say, *With Mercedes Medina.*

She winced. This was terrible. Not only was Don about to screw up the news, but he'd now made it obvious to everybody that the regular newsreader wasn't even supposed to be missing. Thanks a million, she thought.

And then she heard her own voice.

The sound was blurred by the thick glass, but there was no mistaking it. She was too stunned to be relieved. She was past the headlines and into the first item before she realized that what she was hearing was a tape playback of the eleven o'clock broadcast.

It was unlikely that anyone would notice. News content tended not to vary much around this time of night, anyway, and sometimes it could be a difficult job putting a new-sounding slant on items that were going around for the fourth or fifth time. What she couldn't understand was, where did the recording come from? Station output wasn't regularly taped — at least, not in any form that could be retransmitted. She hadn't been aware of anything being done about this one.

Derek must have done it; he was the only technical operator on the station, and it was well within his province. Don probably wouldn't even know how to patch the signal into one of the studio decks. No, Derek it had to be.

But at eleven, Derek hadn't known that she'd be going out. Even Mercedes herself hadn't known it at eleven.

So what was the game?

Suddenly, Mercedes didn't like it. She didn't like it at all. She moved back along to the newsroom window and took another look, and this time she was almost prepared to swear that the chair and the phone and the mess on the desk were exactly as she'd left them. Never mind that she couldn't remember the exact details, she ***knew***. Nobody had been in that office or used that phone, but still she'd been unable to ring in. There was only one possible reason for this that she could think of, an old journalist's ploy for tying up a phone line so that you could get to someone before the opposition could reach them; you dialed through, waited for the other party to reply, and then made some excuse about a wrong number so that they'd hang up. What you didn't do was hang up at your own end, effectively blocking the line for all other calls.

Oversensitive? Perhaps. But the newsroom phone had rung a second time before she'd gone out, and no-

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body had been there. With that and the studio phone out of use, the station had been effectively isolated from all input.

Reasons: none that she could think of. A joke, perhaps. A really strange one.

Maybe she could ask Derek for the explanation now; because here was his shadow in the light from the foyer, and there was the sound of him opening the spring catch from the inside. The heavy glass door swung inward, and Derek's gangling silhouette moved into the frame.

In the time that it had taken for him to unlock the door and emerge, Mercedes had backed around behind the nearest concrete pillar. She was barely aware that she'd done it until she felt the coldness of the untreated surface against her hands. Derek stood, bony-awkward and almost comically skinny, and he peered out into the darkness.

"Mercedes?" he said softly; so softly that it was almost impossible to hear. And then he moved out, letting the door swing shut behind him. From her place in the shadows behind the pillar, she saw that this man of sticks and bones, this sudden stranger, was carrying a large insulated screwdriver from the electronics workshop. Its narrow shaft was almost a foot long. He let it swing by his side, a natural extension of his arm.

He obviously hadn't seen her, because after calling her name he was now walking straight out across the middle of the plaza, toward the escalators. Foyer music was seeping out as the glass door closed slowly on its spring; it was the sound of a Scottish accordion band, something traditional for the season, and it was growing fainter and fainter as the gap narrowed and Mercedes wondered if she could make a run for it and catch it before the lock would reengage.

Several times she almost went, and each time she told herself to wait another second so that Derek couldn't dash back and reach her before she could get the door closed against him; until finally, the faint click of the door told her that the chance had slipped away with all her hesitation. She heard the distant echo of Derek as he started his descent of the escalator; he seemed almost jaunty, as if he were out on a job that was no more than routine.

But his eyes. His eyes had been like dead scales.

If the plan had been to give her a scare, then he'd done a first-class job. But she couldn't persuade herself that this was the explanation, partly because it was too much part of a sequence that linked back all the way to the bitter rainy morning in the derelict street. She'd been sensed, she'd been seen; and now she was to be gathered in. Derek — strange, gangling Derek — was the arm of the reaper.

What was he doing, down below?

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Perhaps he didn't know that she was already inside the plaza, and had gone down to wait for her. Or else — and this seemed more likely — he'd given her time to get in and now he was securing the door in some way so that she wouldn't be able to leave again.

There was only one way for her to go. Upward, to the rooftop car park. The prestige hotel's main entrance was on that level, reached from the street by a spiraling ramp. If you didn't come in a car, preferably one with a high showroom tag, then the hotel didn't want to know you.

At least she'd be safe up there. She'd find people, probably a big New Year's party in one of the conference suites. She'd stay there until dawn, and to hell with explanations.

Moving as silently as she could, Mercedes set out to cross the plaza. She felt as conspicuous as a fly on a white rubber sheet. The entrance to the stairway was an anonymous pair of red ply doors situated between the frontages of a bridal-wear store and a toy shop that had recently gone belly-up. The big shopfront sign with its bunnies and frolicking ladybugs was still in place, but the window beneath it was empty and drab. With a slight sense of relief and a prayer that the doors shouldn't creak, Mercedes let herself through into the stairwell.

It was narrow and undecorated, and it smelled of drains. She took out the small flashlight and shone it ahead to find her way; three floors up to the roof, she reckoned, and then another fire door with a push bar just like the one to the service road. The flashlight, hardly stronger than a decent candle, threw out long, angular shadows and moving bars across the walls as she ascended. Somebody had used the middle landing as a toilet, more than once.

At the top, she had to put all of her weight against the bar. She didn't weigh much, and the bar didn't seem to want to move. It was waist-high, and it was supposed to hinge downward under pressure to withdraw the long bolts at the top and bottom of the door; That was the theory, anyway, but the practice didn't seem to be working out. What was supposed to happen if they ever had a fire? Wasn't somebody supposed to check these things?

She tried to imagine smoke and flames, a panicking crowd. They'd come up those stairs at quite a lick, and they wouldn't be about to stop for anything; so Mercedes took a few paces back and then ran at the door, hitting the bar as hard as she could.

The door flew open, and hit the wall to the side of it with a crash that echoed all the way back down the stairwell.

But it wouldn't matter if Derek heard it, because by the time he could get up the stairs, she'd be across the roof and into the hotel. For the

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second time she emerged into the cold of the night, but this time it was like a release rather than a chore; the sight of stars and the low cloud that glowed faintly as if the city burned beneath it had never been more welcome to her. She was at a corner of the roof, the stairwell head being a brick tower close to where the station kept its radio car. She could see this in the shadows only a few yards away, grimy windscreen reflecting the neon tracery of a department-store sign on the next block. Straight ahead, less than a hundred yards across the asphalt, was the painted-on driveway and the entrance to the hotel.

It was wide and glossy and glassy and bright. Automatic doors led through to the lobby, where expensively carpeted steps climbed past display cases to a mezzanine level with reception desk, low sofas, and coffee tables amongst the potted plants. Hotel staff in dark suits or crisp whites could be seen moving around inside.

And between the hotel and Mercedes stood a roll-across metal gate.

She ran to it, grasped it, shook it; the barrier hardly moved at all. It was eight feet high and topped with spikes. A monkey might have made it over or a snake might have made it through, but Mercedes had no chance at all.

People were coming out of the hotel, and she called to them; "Hey," she shouted. "Over here, help!" But as the automatic doors hissed open, the group of seven or eight came spilling out with a party roar that drowned her completely, and within seconds they were at their cars and switching on their music systems in a kind of stereo war so loud and so discordant that she couldn't even hear herself. The cars started out in a jerky convoy, windows open and blasting as they drove off in a swirl of abandoned streamers and festive debris. As the last set of taillights disappeared into the downward spiral, they left behind a windblown silence in which Mercedes was calling hoarsely to the night air. Five floors below, somebody was sounding off as the traffic before him made a slow start at the lights.

Mercedes let go of the barrier. She'd been holding on so hard that it was now difficult to get her fingers to disengage. What was she going to do now? Go back below, and risk meeting Derek on the stairs?

Or was Derek up here with her already?

She moved to the nearest shadow; and just in time. She saw the stairhead door swing outward in silence. Derek stepped forward in the doorway and waited, listening. Mercedes held her breath. He turned his head slowly from side to side like a blind thing, as if trying to locate her with some deep radar sense that went beyond sound or vision; and then, moving with a stealth that looked faintly absurd in one so tall and so

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angular, he melted off to check around the back of the stairhead.

He'd left the fire door wide open. It wouldn't take him long to check around behind, and then he'd be back and he'd see her as she ran. She'd hesitated once already and missed an opportunity at safety; now she was on her way even before she was certain that her decision was a wise one.

He appeared so fast that he must have expected this, been listening for her; but even so, he mustn't have been prepared for her to jump so soon, because she was just able to get in and slam the door before he could dive through after her. She wrenched up on the bar as hard as she could; Derek's weight on the other side of the door actually helped her, because he unwittingly pushed it home that last vital fraction of an inch that allowed the long bolts to engage with a bang.

Mercedes was in darkness now, and again she fumbled out the flashlight in order to check that the bar was secure. As she ran the light over, a soft tapping that was almost a scratching began.

"Mercedes?"

The door began to rattle; just faint ly, as if under no more than fingertip pressure.

"Mercedes?"

Three round, crashing blows against the door that echoed like explosions in the stairwell and made her step back in fright; but the door held solid, and then came that soft whisper again.

"It's *me*, Mercedes." And then, slyly: "You know who I mean, don't you?"

She began to descend, the flashlight showing the way ahead once more. The batteries were starting to fade now, the light yellowing and getting dimmer, but she couldn't bring herself to switch it off even for a moment. She wondered what on earth she was going to do when she reached the plaza level again.

She'd be shut in, but Derek would be shut out. So far, so good. But she was guessing that he'd maybe pulled the wires on the buzzer, which meant that she wouldn't be able to get Don's attention inside the station; which left the option of perhaps trying to break into one of the shops in order to get to a phone and call the police. She'd never broken into anything before, and wasn't even sure how she'd go about it.

And suppose she got to a phone. What then? What exactly was she going to tell them? Because what had actually ***happened***? She'd made an unofficial trip out, and she'd missed a broadcast. Derek had covered for her, and then emerged to come looking. He'd followed her to the roof, where she'd locked him out. There wasn't one element in the sequence where all the unreasonableness didn't seem to be on her side. All that she could offer was her fears, and her reading of

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the undercurrents of the situation. It was like a perfect melody with wrong harmonies that only she could hear.

It didn't help. She *knew*, deep down where it counted; there had been a mutual recognition between her and the presence at that derelict site, and now that same presence was wearing Derek like a glove. Perhaps it had even caused him to make that phone call to the newsroom that had sent her out in the first place; the station's commercial production studio had harmonizers and equalizers that could turn a man's voice into a reasonable facsimile of a woman's, if the added on-line interference was bad enough to cover the deceit.

It wasn't Derek, not in the true sense; this was the sandman, and he was bringing her a dream. But it wasn't the kind of dream that anybody would want to lie half-awake for, in drowsy anticipation.

Down on the plaza again, she went across to the indoor garden near the top of the escalators. It was a half-hearted affair, with most of the borders just empty dirt because all of the plants had starved away from daylight; there were small trees in barrels, a few rustic benches for shoppers, and a wishing well for local charities that had a stiff wire mesh just under the surface of the water to stop kids from reaching down and helping themselves to the pennies. Mercedes chose a fair-sized stone from one of the border walls and tried its weight. It was loose-laid, and so no problem to move, and she found that she could just about carry it.

Staggering along like the world's most heavily pregnant woman, Mercedes headed for the radio station foyer. Halfway there she stopped a moment to rest, and that was when she heard it; the sound of a lift somewhere else in the plaza, a sound that would be lost during normal shopping hours but that was now like a warning signal in the cavernous silence. It said that Derek was back inside. It said that he was coming for her.

Her first attempt to smash the big foyer window had no effect; she couldn't believe it, but the stone simply bounced back in her hands and set the whole pane shivering. The second time, she threw it hard and let go; this attempt put a sudden and terrifying split into the glass that traveled outward from the point of impact like forked lightning. For one moment she stood in deep awe of what she'd done, and then she set about breaking enough of a hole out of the reinforced window for her to step through.

There was no time to feel guilty, or even to begin to enjoy it. The glass fell out in big plate-sized pieces onto the foyer's carpet, and she felt something catch and tear at her coat as she bent to crawl through the opening that she'd made. Inside, as she straight-

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ened, she was taken by the bizarre feeling that she'd squeezed out of one world and into another; here it was warm, and the lights were late-evening soft, and the foyer speakers were relaying "Here Comes Summer" at a low murmur. Odd choice, she thought as she pushed into the inner corridor, a degree of professionalism reasserting itself as she entered home territory; but then, as she moved down past the offices toward the studio and what she'd been certain would be a degree of safety, she heard the record ending and the DJ coming on-air to link into the next track.

The DJ wasn't Don.

In fact, he wasn't anybody who worked at the station at all; his name was Dave Cook, and he'd left six months before on the promise of a contract in television. The contract had never materialized, and now he was working at some really tiny new station over on the Welsh border. Mercedes started to run toward the studio, already half knowing what she was going to find; the sound of the long-departed Dave Cook was a strong indication, and the absence of the red transmission light over the studio door seemed to confirm it.

She burst in. There they were, a neat triptych behind the sound console: Dan and his two young ladies, one on either knee with his arms flung around them, their faces black as old iron and their necks wired together with microphone lead. Their eyes were all bulging and their tongues were all sticking out; Yah Boo, they seemed to be saying, Sucks to the World.

The door behind Mercedes closed on its damper with a quiet thump, tapping her on the back and pushing her to go forward into the studio. She took one halting step, and looked around her in bewilderment. Her place of safety was suddenly old, bad news. Over by the big surprise behind the console was the sight that she'd been on the way to expecting: four full twelve-inch metal spools of tape in a stack, with a fifth playing on the deck. These would be the standby tapes, the emergency fallback material kept in a locked cupboard for occasions of serious equipment failure or evacuation of the station. It was supposed to be somebody's job to keep them up-to-date, but that somebody obviously hadn't.

It almost didn't shake her to walk around to the other side of the desk; Don and the two girls didn't even look real and their expressions were nearly comic, as if death were a bad joke that had simply jerked them away in the middle of its punchline. One outflung, long-nailed hand brushed at her coat as she carefully squeezed by them, and she delicately drew herself aside to avoid further contact.

Mercedes had been shown the basics of driving a desk on her first day at the station, but the details had gone whistling down the same hole

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as so much of the useless information that they'd been throwing at her around that time. She saw a long bank of color-coded faders, another of equalizer dials, a row of needle indicators that bounced and bopped along with the outgoing music; there were pieces of masking tape making crude labels with messages like *off-air p/bk* and *tx* and *Do not use!,* this last with a small skull and crossbones added, and the whole array was topped with a mess of running order sheets and unsorted commercial cartridges.

The absurd thought that occurred to her, as she tried to make sense of the layout, was that at least she'd now have no problem in convincing anybody that she'd been in real danger. All that she needed to do now was to find a way to get a Mayday message out, and fast. Derek might have tied up the phone lines somehow, but he'd had to leave the station's output running. She could make her plea for help live and on-air, and somebody would come.

Somebody would.

Wouldn't they?

None of the sliding controls on the desk seemed to be making any damn difference to anything; the transmission lights stayed dead, and the Beach Boys played on as the tape reels turned. She looked frantically from one side to the other, knowing that she had minutes or less to get her message out and then to find somewhere to hide. Every fader was up, but the mike still wasn't open — which could only mean that Derek must have pulled the necessary patch-leads around the side of the desk. With no technical knowledge, Mercedes didn't have a hope of putting herself on-air.

He'd killed the studio. He'd tied up all the outgoing phone lines. What did that leave?

It left the incoming request line, the one that would be hooked up to an answering machine. The signal fed directly into the desk, but Mercedes had seen the TOs using a white phone to speak to callers off-air during tracks. She had to reach across Don to take it from its hook; it was an awkward maneuver because she didn't want to touch him, and managing this wasn't easy because she didn't want to look at him, either.

Lifting the phone had automatically switched the line to the handset. She broke in on what sounded like a couple of giggling kids phoning in for a dare.

"Listen," she said, "this is an emergency. I want you to put your phone down and then call the police. Tell them . . ."

"*Hello?*" one of the kids said.

"Yes, hello. My name is Mercedes Medina. I'm a newsreader here. Please call the police and say . . ."

But whoever it was on the other end of the line, she wasn't listening; Mercedes heard the scuffling of a hand being placed over the mouth-

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piece, and an awed voice saying, *"It's her that does the news!"*

"I know," she said, "please! I need your help for something very important . . ."

"Hello?" the kid said, returning.

"Please listen to me! Don't talk and don't go away! People are *dead* here!"

But the voice that answered her then was not that of a child; it was one that she recognized instantly and with a cold, crawling sense of helpless fear. It was the heavily processed facsimile of a female voice that she'd first heard only an hour before.

"Happy New Year, Mercedes," it said. *"I've got a present for you. Want to come and see what it is?"*

Heard now and without the disguising overlays of fake interference, it wasn't so convincing; it didn't even sound human anymore. "Derek," she said, "it's you, isn't it?" But the voice went on as if she hadn't spoken.

"All right, then," it said with faked resignation. *"I can see I'll just have to bring it to you myself."*

She dropped the phone. She'd taken too long, allowed herself to be trapped; she looked around for a way out, a weapon *anything*. With sudden inspiration, she moved to the tape deck and ripped the tape out from around the pickup head; the music from the big speakers overhead ended with an ungainly squelch, and the big reels on the deck started to speed up as its tension control sensed a lack of resistence. Somebody might hear, somebody might wonder; perhaps even the managing director, who was notorious for calling people to account for fluffs and glitches that had happened at the most ungodly hours. Given time, somebody might even come to see what had gone wrong.

And then they'd probably find her, making up a foursome with Don and the others; because time was something that she was almost out of.

There was a soft thump from just outside; it was the sound of the studio's outer door as it closed behind someone. Someone who was about to open the inner door and step through into this one-exit, soundproofed killing pit. Mercedes was looking, but she couldn't even see any scissors or used blades for tape editing.

The door opened with a hiss; he came in sideways with his eyes glowing like coals under darkened brows, a single strand of damp hair hanging forward over his face. He was hiding something from her, and it was as he turned to bring it into view that Mercedes found the will to move. She snatched up one of the metal reels from the stack beside her and, with grace and an accuracy that wouldn't have been possible with forethought, threw it edge-on and Frisbee-style toward Derek. It zipped through the air, spewing out tape as it spun, lifting in flight and making straight for

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his face. He ducked, but not fast enough. The edge of the reel clipped him neatly on the forehead and he staggered back.

He fell against the door, but the door gave only reluctantly as its damper resisted. He was pitched down onto his side as the reel clunked onto the floor and rolled away, still leaving a trail of tape behind it. Derek was struggling feebly. Mercedes came around the desk, sick at what she'd done and unable to resist her own feelings of guilt; she'd never killed anything, never even *hurt* anything before, and now here she was, plunging into the major league with a human target. She hesitated when she saw that Derek was moving to get to his feet again; she'd slowed him, but it seemed that she hadn't stopped him.

He pushed himself up against the doorframe. His movements were stiff, his eyes empty and dazed-looking; when he glanced down, it was with a thick, liquid slowness.

"Shit," he said bleakly. "You spoiled my surprise."

He was looking down at his right hand; this was gripping a wooden plate that Mercedes recognized, after a moment, as the newsroom bill spike. There was a lag in recognition because of the fact that only a couple of inches of the spike itself were visible. His hand was held out in front of his chest, just where the breastbone ended and the soft tissues began; the point was marked neatly by a dark stain that was beginning to spread through the material of his sweatshirt.

The fight to get upright was obviously proving too much for him. With a sigh of regret, he gave up and began the return slide to the floor. He hit with a grunt, and his hand fell from the spike's wooden base; this stayed in place like some king-sized hatpin pushed into some life-sized voodoo doll, and now Mercedes saw that his eyes were fixed on nothing in particular.

It took her several minutes to raise the courage to step over him; time in which Derek didn't move, didn't blink, and didn't even bleed much anymore. A tiny bubble of blood appeared at one nostril, stayed for a while, and then popped as the last breath slowly left him. The overhead speakers hissed with the no-transmission phenomenon that was called — with grim appropriateness — "dead air."

Between this and the four lifeless bodies in the room — none of them, thankfully, her own — Mercedes found herself being driven from the studio by an urge that was almost physical. She stepped carefully over Derek, forcing herself to watch him in case this should turn out to be some elaborate and impossible trick to get her within reach, and then she fell thankfully through the outer door and into the low air-conditioned hum

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of the corridor. The first sight that met her eyes was that of a long trail of yellow papers, scattered around the corridor floor and stretching back and around the corner toward the newsroom; these were all of the bulletin scripts from the past few hours, ripped from the spike and discarded en route to the studio. He must have been pulling them off one at a time, she realized, like the petals from a flower or the legs from a fly.

Her own legs were feeling none too steady, but they held her up well enough as she headed toward the offices. There had to be a phone somewhere, at least one outside line that Derek (or, as she was thinking, the potent force that had expressed itself as Derek) hadn't remembered or managed to block. She wanted to call somebody — it almost didn't matter whom anymore . . . the police, the boss, her mother in Bristol, any human voice or contact.

Surely the director's office would have its own outside line; probably more than one. She expected to find the door locked, but it wasn't. She felt around for the light switch before she entered, not wanting to step out into darkness; the lights came on to reveal the quiet expanse of executive furnishing. The carpet was thick and soft, the wood paneling warm and mellow. The phone on the desk was ivory-white.

And it rang.

Mercedes lifted the receiver slowly, and listened. The voice that came down the line was a signal now stripped of any pretense at humanity.

"Men may come, and men may go," it quoted softly, *"but I go on forever.*

"Happy New Year, Mercedes."

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Ken Wisman's short and touching celebration of the season is about a young boy who finds the essence of Christmas in a special tree and its remarkable inhabitant.

The Christmas Tree

BY
KEN WISMAN

Deep in a wood near a pond that harped to the raindrop, in a place where the thatch smoked in the sunny thaw, stood a gathering of firs. Three of the seven trees were inhabited by spirits. One was called Pomona.

Pomona grew on a hillock away from the other firs and nearer the pond and the winter drum of the hailstones. She was content alone.

Deep in the wood where no man set foot, the four goddesses The Seasons still reigned. Next to Mother Earth, Pomona loved the four ladies best.

Spring was a young girl and Summer an older. They brought the cardinal and the robin. Autumn dressed beautifully. But Winter, a gray old woman wise in the ways of the world of spirit and enchantment, Pomona liked best.

Winter brought the snow that fell against Pomona's branches and played her needles like the pins in a music box. Pomona always sang in accompaniment and sang her Winter Song.

Thus, Pomona grew in innocence, deep in a wood, far from the commerce of men. And so she didn't recognize the two-legged creatures that came one winter to the gathering of the firs.

One of the creatures carried a ball of rope; the other toted a saw.

They set to work cutting and trussing the firs below the hillock. Pomona had had little to say to the other two tree-spirits in the past seven years. And so she had nothing to say when they were cut down. Pomona only hoped the two men would pass her by, and she would have the deep

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wood, the pond, and her Winter Song for her own.

But when the six firs were felled, the two men stood before Pomona.

"A beauty," said Mike, his breath billowing like cotton.

"Seven foot if it's an inch," said Bob. His pipe steamed in the humid thaw.

Bob put the saw to Pomona's trunk.

She screamed: *No!*

But the men could neither hear nor see her. And suddenly Pomona was toppling over, her trunk severed from her mother Earth.

Bob and Mike loaded the seven firs on a sled, and eight dogs pulled the load to a clearing where several trucks were parked. Money was exchanged between one of the truckers and Mike. Then Pomona was thrown on a flatbed with dozens of other trees.

When the truck was under way, Pomona asked the tree-spirit above her: *Where are they taking us?*

To sell, said the spirit, who had inhabited a tree near the road and who had observed the comings and goings of men. *For their holiday.*

The tree-spirit's explanation raised a hundred more questions in Pomona's mind. But she didn't ask. She wasn't a friendly spirit and preferred to suffer alone.

Pomona was put in a parking lot lit with strings of colored lights. A strange, tinny music blared from loudspeakers. Day and night, people came to pull at Pomona's branches. Or shake her trunk. Or scuff at her needles shed on the gravel.

Three days in the lot made Pomona numb from humiliation. And so she didn't hear the conversation between the small boy and his father.

"Branches are full," the father said. "What do you think, Jamie?"

The boy stared at the top where Pomona lay in apathy. "It's got an angel."

John laughed. "Well, I can't think of any better recommendation."

The father paid the man in the lot twenty-five dollars, tied Pomona's tree to the top of his car, and drove away.

Pomona was put in a stand and was stood in a corner. The man strung strands of colored lights on her branches. One wire was old and cracked. When John tried the lights, sparks crackled from the wire.

Pomona flew to the spot in a panic. Worse than drought, worse than a hurricane wind, a tree-spirit fears fire.

Can't the fool see? she said, then sighed. *What does it matter? Better a quick death than a slow one by thirst. And if I go up in flames, I'll ignite this house. It would serve him right to die with me.*

Pomona smiled with satisfaction.

It was hot in the house. And dry.

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Moisture escaped through the tree's needles at an alarming rate. Because Pomona's life was tied to the life of her tree, she grew weak.

I'm thirsty, she said. *I'm very thirsty.*

"Would you like a drink of water?" a voice said from the shadows.

Pomona was shocked to see the boy step forth. Thirst won over pride.

Yes, Pomona replied.

Jamie got a glass of water and held it tiptoe toward the top of the tree.

You don't water a tree like you water a human! Pomona said sharply.

Jamie got his father, who checked the falling needles and brittle branches and put a bucket at the bottom of the tree.

When John was gone, Pomona asked Jamie: *How do I look to you?*

"You're the angel that lives in the tree. About this big." Jamie indicated six inches with his hands. "You're very pretty."

I'm not an angel Pomona said. *I'm a tree-spirit. Centuries ago all men could see me. But there is no room in this world for magic anymore. Men have forgotten the world of enchantment —*

The boy cocked his head.

What's the use? Pomona said.

"Do you have enough water?" Jamie asked.

Pomona ignored him, and he wandered away.

Jing-O, the cat, came in next and clawed his way up Pomona's trunk. Pomona, her strength renewed by the water, blew herself up to twice her size and hurtled down the branches. Jing-O screeched and ran away.

The following morning it snowed. Big flakes that fluttered against the window like moths drawn to flame. Pomona lay sighing in the branches.

"What's the matter?" the boy said from the shadows.

Leave me be.

"Is it the snow?"

No answer.

I can bring some inside for you."

Fool! Pomona shouted. *It'd melt in minutes.*

"You don't like me," Jamie said.

You paid to have my tree severed from its roots. Without a tree I'll die.

"I'm sorry. Daddy didn't know it would hurt you to bring you here. We used to have an art'ficial one. But this year Mommy's very sick and Daddy wanted a special tree."

No answer.

Jamie knelt by the bucket and pushed with all his might. The tree moved a few inches. Jamie shoved again and the branches brushed the window.

Open it! Pomona said.

Jamie pushed the window up and the branches sprang out. Snow fell through the needles with a delicate crystal sound. Pomona sang.

Jamie stepped back in wonder — for Pomona's song was beyond man-

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kind's experience. Pomona sang of northern winds and the white hair of the Old Woman Winter that fell in snow all over the land. That part of Pomona's song was sad.

She also sang of the promise of springtime — for within the old woman was the seed of April, and her death meant the birth of spring. And that part of Pomona's song was happy.

The song entered Jamie's heart; he would never be the same.

The next day the family decorated the tree. John carried Mary down from her sick room and put her on the couch. She was pale and weak from her illness.

John and Jamie hung the ornaments — Jamie handing his father the gold and silver balls and garlands.

"These are new, Mary," John said, holding up a crystal ornament for her to see. "Seems yesterday I found the tree with half its branches out the window."

"The angel wanted to feel the snow," Jamie said.

"Then Jamie and I were in the store downtown," John continued, "when he spotted these decorations. 'They look like big snowflakes,' he said. 'The angel will like them.'"

John glanced at his wife, who had drifted asleep. Jamie took one of the snowflake ornaments, tiptoed to his mother, and put it between her thin hands.

"Hush." John said. "Don't wake her." He stood back and admired the decorations. "A fine job. A really fine tree."

The next morning was Christmas. John carried Mary down. She felt better, and Jamie hovered close by.

"Go ahead, Jamie," Mary whispered. "Open your presents."

The boy ran to the tree and tore the colored paper. Each gift he opened he brought to his mother to see. Mary soon fell asleep, and John lifted her and thought to himself how much lighter she seemed each day.

While John brought Mary upstairs, Pomona asked Jamie: ***What is this holiday you celebrate?***

"It's for the baby Jesus," Jamie said.

That's not much help.

"I'll ask Daddy."

When John returned, looking drawn and sad, Jamie asked, "The angel wants to know about Christmas."

"Well, you tell her that for different people it means different things," John said. "Some people celebrate it as a Christian holiday. But your mother isn't Christian, and she celebrates, too. Your mom says it doesn't matter which religion claims the baby Jesus as their own. The important thing is what he represents. So Christmas to her is a celebration of the goodness of the human spirit and all the love that fills the human heart.

"That's what your mother says, Jamie. She's very wise."

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"Mommy's going to die, isn't she, Daddy?" Jamie said.

"No!" John said, confused. He held his arms out to his son, who rushed to him. They embraced. "Yes, Jamie. Yes. Your mother's going to die. But I want you to remember. She gave you life. She will live on through you. Do you understand, Jamie?"

Jamie looked at Pomona, who watched from her perch in the tree. Jamie remembered Pomona's Winter song — the Old Woman Winter who carried the seed of spring and new life inside and whose death would see life carried on.

"I understand."

When the family had gone, Pomona came down and inspected the gifts. Like most tree spirits who had been raised under the stars and planets, she loved sparkly and beautiful things. In addition to the presents, she had her tree to admire, for John had left the lights on, and a thousand thousand stars glittered in the balls and tinsel.

Pomona went to the treetop and lay among the branches. But too many thoughts tumbled in her head and wouldn't let her sleep.

Not only had these people bought her and sentenced her to a slow death, they had aired their problems in front of her. Whatever joy she experienced from seeing her tree dressed up was destroyed.

Pomona drowsed. Suddenly she was awakened by a crackling and the smell of burning. She flew down the tree in a panic.

And sure enough — just as she had predicted — a fire had started from the faulty wire.

Fear turned to anger.

Serve them all right, she thought, to die with me in a horrible fire . . .

Jamie, Pomona whispered. She hovered above his bed. But her voice, reduced to a small, hoarse whisper, didn't stir the boy from his sleep.

Jamie, she called again. Then she remembered the Winter Song. She sang. The boy heard it. His eyes opened, and he called out, "Mommy!"

Pomona said: *Listen closely. There's a fire. You have to get out of the house.*

Jamie ran from his room and into the hallway, where the smoke billowed like menacing rain clouds. Jamie ran into his father's room and awakened him.

John dropped to his knees. "Jamie, go downstairs and leave out the back. Will you do that, Son?"

"Yes."

"I have to get your mother." John disappeared down the hallway.

Follow me, Pomona said to Jamie.

She led him down and through the living room, where Jamie grabbed a box of the crystal ornaments. Pomona and Jamie caught up to Jing-O, who was at the back door. And Jamie

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ran out into the arms of a fireman.

Later, curled in the back of the family car, Jamie opened the ornament box. Pomona, shrunk to the size of a beetle, hovered above.

My tree is dead, Pomona whispered. *I must die, too. What a fool I was to be taken in by all that talk of love and goodness. It was only because you gave me water, you know. And those hours in the snow.*

"Shush," said Jamie. He gently blew the tree-spirit with his breath until she settled in the box. Then he closed the lid and slept.

The following day, John moved the family into an apartment. In the afternoon, Jamie put the box with Pomona and the ornaments in a drawer and went out with his father.

Later, Jamie came back and opened the box.

"I have something," he said to Pomona, who was no larger than a gnat.

Leave me be, she squeaked.

But Jamie couldn't hear.

"Look," he said, tipping the container.

Pomona feathered into the branches of a potted Norfolk pine.

"I saw a lot of others," Jamie said. "Some even had angels like you, but I bought an empty one."

Hmmph. Not as nice as my other tree, Pomona squeaked. *And not a good fit, if I grow back to the size I was before. But it'll do.*

Smiling, Jamie brought the tree in to show his mother.

In April, Jamie's mother died. And the boy laid one of the crystal snowflakes on her grave.

And for all his days, Jamie kept Christmas in his way. Even after he was grown up and married, even after he was too old to see an angel, Jamie came to his father's house and hung a crystal on the Norfolk pine, and he told the story of Pomona to his own boy and girl. For Jamie had found that Christmas was more than goodies and gifts — Christmas was that which was holy, and the holiest of all was the magic in a child's heart, and love was the magic that Christmas brings.

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Amyas Naegele is a young writer who lives and works in New York City. He is a graduate of Cornell University and has traveled extensively, a fact reflected in the exotic locales of his stories. In 1984 he was named a runner-up in Redbook's *fiction contest for young writers and he has published in several literary magazines. "The Rise and Fall of Father Alex" is his first contribution to* F & SF.

The Rise and Fall of Father Alex

BY
AMYAS NAEGELE

When Father Alex arrived in Merawagi sometime after the Second World War, he found a river, a deep green valley, and a people so primitive they decorated themselves with feathers and bones and were struck in awe by the simple act of lighting a match.

The child of traveling performers, reared into adulthood by the brothers of a Swiss monastic order, Father Alex came to New Guinea by way of the secluded alpine resort of Montfeston, where, for a little over two years, he had acted as the town's pastor — his first appointment following his graduation from the seminary. For the most part the role had been an enjoyable one. Montfeston was small and provincial, and his refined manners, his healthy good looks, his ingenuity, and his talent for recounting entertaining tales soon won him favor among the townspeople. Old women basked in his attention, young men envied his athletic physique, children brought him their broken toys, and villagers of all ages stopped to chat with him whenever he was about. He was listened to attentively, especially when he illustrated his conversations with stories from his youth, of his early upbringing as the only child of the Flying Marrats.

At these wondrous stories his parishioners would shake their heads and smile, and the old women would click their tongues in undisguised pleasure. Such responses always filled Father Alex with enormous satisfaction, as if there was something deep in his nature that hungered for the spotlight, and he went to his room and dug from the bottom of his linen chest a scrapbook of his family's triumphs, first on the catapults and lat-

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er on the flying trapeze. Returning to the citizens of Montfeston with tales of double back flips and blindfolded somersaults, Father Alex held his listeners in awe, adding color with recollections of his own of performing bears, magnificent theaters and voluminous tents, the alternating silences and roars of the crowds.

"Marvelous," tisked the old women.

"Yes," Montfeston's mayor agreed. "Stupendous."

"During the war I saw a man survive a five-hundred-meter fall without a parachute," said a German tourist in a wheelchair, a long cigarette smoldering between his fingers.

Inevitably, the initial interest Father Alex experienced as the new pastor wore off and he found his services a touch less well attended at the end of the first year. Recognizing the spellbinding quality of his stories, however, he worked his tales into the fabric of his sermons, relating them to a variety of topics from Faith to the complexity of God's design. Within a week, church attendance was back to what it had been, but Father Alex did not stop there. Compulsive to the extreme, a trim, muscular man with fast blue eyes and a mind as busy as his fretful hands, Father Alex honed his narrative skills. Drawing from his scrapbook chronologically over successive Sundays, he built a continuum of suspense, attracting ever greater numbers to his church.

Caught up in the drama, people cornered Father Alex in Montfeston's narrow lanes to extract hints of coming installments. He was watched and followed wherever he went; it was even impossible for him to do his morning calisthenics without someone peeking around the rectory wall, and when the time came to build a new chicken coop — a task for which his considerable mechanical skills were more than adequate — he had to fend off dozens of volunteers. He loved the attention and it worried him, for with each consecutive tale the expectations of his parishioners grew proportionately, keeping him up until all hours refining his next story to outdo the last; his showman's heart would not permit him to disappoint. Worse, he was rapidly approaching the end of his scrapbook, the final clippings describing his parents' exploits as they were driven by their demanding audiences to ever more astounding feats and, ultimately, their deaths

The topic of his parents' demise distressed Father Alex: he could not bear the thought of having to relive the tragedy, experienced during a tender period of his youth, before his parishioners, and yet he had come this far, too far perhaps to avoid it. He could not evade his parishioners, nor lie to them. Only a miracle, it appeared, could save him. He wished that time could go backward so that he could begin anew; he dreamed of

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being far away, among people who could not understand him in any of the languages he had been tutored in, among people who would love him, not for his past, not for what he said, but for the things he did. Settling on his knees, he prayed for deliverance, and when a letter arrived some days later from the archdiocese asking for volunteers to perform missionary work in the South Pacific, he wrote back at once saying, yes, it was just the sort of thing he was looking for.

The old women wept to see him go, wringing their handkerchiefs and biting their knuckles in sorrow. Although everyone in Montfeston wished him well, few felt they would ever see him again. He was, after all, going to live among savages.

Disembarking from a Dutch merchant vessel in Port Moresby, Father Alex was met by a huge pink man in black shorts and gray knee socks who introduced himself as Father Daly. With him was a short, muscular native in threadbare fatigues and a leather airman's cap strapped at the chin. Father Daly was Irish. His hair was white and his nose was red and blotchy from the sun.

"This here is Caspar," he said, gripping the barefoot native by the back of his neck and giving him a shake. "He's going to be your guide up into the bush. Let's get in the Jeep. I've got work piled up so high it's liable to rot before I've even had a chance to look at it."

Except on the boat, where at least there had been a steady breeze, Father Alex had never experienced such hot weather. He felt as if he had just risen from a bath, heavy and warm, his knees weak and his lungs inhaling steam. Reaching for his luggage, Father Alex found that Caspar had already beaten him to it, heaping the priest's trunks effortlessly onto his back. In another minute everyone was hurtling down a dusty road lined with eucalyptus and banana trees, the Jeep lurching through potholes as though it had square wheels. At the roadside, natives in loincloths and ill-fitting trousers squatted in the sun smoking long cigarettes, the women among them half-naked, their breasts intricate with tattoos.

Father Daly kept a cockatoo in his office; lizards dashed across the walls, and natives came and went with brooms, plates of biscuits, and stacks of papers. The cockatoo screamed for tea, shrieked, "Intolerable! Intolerable!" and spat seeds all over the floor.

"So, it says here you were raised in a monastery?" Father Daly leaned back in his chair and tossed a file onto his desk.

"Yes, Father," said Father Alex. His English was fluent and well pronounced. He sat in a chair opposite, his hands clenched on one another and his feet balanced on his toes. His eyes seemed reflective, focused on

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nothing in particular, and his hair was combed briskly to one side. Although restrained, his pose was charged with energy, like a gymnast anxiously awaiting his turn on the floor. "My parents were acrobats," he continued. "They died when I was twelve, leaving me—"

"*Acrobats?* May they rest in peace."

"Trapeze artists. They were attempting a difficult feat — although I prefer to think of their accomplishments; there are many stories."

"I'm sure." Father Daly pushed impatiently to his feet. "But that's not why we're here, is it? To tell stories?"

"No, Father," Father Alex shifted uneasily in his chair, flexing and unflexing his hands. "Quite the contrary."

"Indeed." Father Daly paced the room, his thick red neck expanding against the confines of his collar. "We're here to prove great works. To build churches and keep them filled. To bring God to the primitives and to prepare them for the modern world, uplift them." Taking one hand from behind his back, he made an appropriate gesture, then turned to Father Alex. "Now I don't believe in wasting time. I could spend weeks telling you a thousand things you'd learn sooner and better in the bush. Best thing is to get out there and start figuring things out for yourself. Just don't expect miracles. Not here. When you reach the Merawagi River, you'll be among people who've never seen a European. You start at square one. Now, unless there are any questions. . . ?" He stopped behind his cluttered desk and shot a glance at Father Alex. Bewildered, the young man shook his head. "Good. Then find that rascal Caspar and get going. I haven't time for this." Collapsing in his chair, he snatched up a fistful of papers and waved them in front of him. "They're worshiping bamboo airplanes up at Guari, and at Woitape there's a man claiming he's the black Christ! God only knows what will befall us next. It's intolerable! Intolerable!"

Caspar was waiting in the hall, smoking a cigarette rolled in a strip of newspaper, the bespectacled eyes of an American president peering from just beyond his lips. The native watched the words and letters turn to smoke. "We go in two days," Father Alex announced. Caspar looked up at him, passive and unsurprised.

"I go buy tobacco and supplies," he said simply. "Please you give me hundreds of dollars." Father Alex was momentarily taken aback; the church had organized all the necessary provisions in advance of his arrival. Wary not to start off his relationship with his guide on the wrong foot, he judiciously made a counterproposal of thirty-five dollars. Caspar puffed unchangeably on his cigarette. "O.K., fifty," he said at last, unfolding a large, yellow-palmed hand.

When they met a couple of days

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later on the docks, Caspar had with him innumerable boxes of junk jewelry, tobacco, and old newspapers. Father Alex said nothing, allowing the goods to be packed along with everything else into shipping crates. They set sail that afternoon, journeying up the coast in an ancient steamboat scabrous with rust and crowded with men and cartons and pigs bound head to foot in palm leaves. Two days later they turned inland, riding crocodile-faced canoes for weeks up lazy rivers, and at a village situated beside a crashing waterfall, hired a train of bearers to freight their cargo into the hills.

While trekking through the virgin jungle with its trees as wide as houses, they encountered sticky black leeches, iridescent butterflies the size of pocket Bibles, and laughing birds of paradise with long, luxuriant tails. Along the trail they met pygmies with sickles of mother-of-pearl hooked through their noses; grass-skirted women carrying pigs, potatoes, and children on their backs; and atop a ridge, hidden on the mission maps beneath a large blank puzzle-shape marked with the words "uncharted territory" and "obscured by clouds," they discovered an airplane, rusted and overgrown with orchids and vines and bearing on its twisted tail the inverted symbol of the rising sun. In the cockpit the skeletons of two Japanese remained obediently in place, a single crimson spider drawing silken threads between their mouths.

"In wartime," Caspar said in passing, "I was guide to the Americans and Australians and I saw many things."

One Sunday, when all but Caspar had begun to wonder if there would ever be an end to the trees, they came upon the Merawagi River, a raging torrent distinguished by its particularly ragged course. For days they followed it, zigzagging through forest and wetland, until an afternoon came when Father Alex suddenly declared that they had reached their final destination, the place where he would build his mission.

Except for a small hillock nearby and a view through the trees of a cloud-ringed mountain peak, there was nothing to recommend the spot. The adjoining flats abounded in oozy swamps, rife with sinkholes and bubbling subterranean streams. Stinging plants grew thick along the river, the air sang with mosquitoes, and although the party had encountered undeniable evidence of human inhabitation — soft, round footprints along the well-worn trails; discarded banana peels; and obscene symbols carved in the trunks of trees — they hadn't seen a soul. But a beam of light, streaming with theatrical precision through the knotty twilight, lit upon Father Alex as he rested with one hand upon a vine, his body poised as if he were about to swing into the tangle.

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Whether it was his faith in God or the lean of his all-too-generous imagination or something in his early upbringing that inured him to that light, Father Alex was unaware; perhaps it was all three.

One way or the other, the idea became fixed in his mind that it was here that he would settle, here that he would build his mission and spread the word of God. It was that same evening that the Wagi people, hidden all day behind tree trunks and giant ferns, saw the stranger with the light skin and unfuzzy hair make fire with the motion of one hand, one small stick passed swiftly over his groin.

"Hi-yeee!" an awestruck gasp escaped the trees. A million fireflies blinked in the gathering dark. Father Alex stood transfixed, an eyebrow raised, the match flame dwindling toward his fingertips. Caspar, squatting at his feet in his airman's cap and tattered trousers, looked up at Father Alex and then off toward the trees, continuing to roll a cigarette in a strip of newsprint. His hands worked blindly, with a nimbleness surprising for their power and size, for they were huge hands, out of all proportion with the rest of his body.

"Wagi people," he said.

Looking toward the trees, a smile flickered across Father Alex's face as the match flame extinguished itself and fell, blackened and twisted from his hand. Reaching into his pocket, he struck another. "Hoy-laah!" the jungle exclaimed. Touching Father Alex's arm, Caspar drew the match flame to his face and lit his cigarette, blinking upward in silence and lack of wonder.

"Remarkable," said Father Alex. "They have never seen a match."

"The Wagi know nothing," Caspar replied, waving an insect from his face. "Their heads are like stones," Father Alex fixed his eyes upon the trees, his forehead lowered, his mind buried in thought. It seemed to him at that moment that he had reached a new beginning, that from here on out his life was like an empty book and that anything was possible. Warm with excitement, he lit one match after another.

"Hola-gijeee!" the forest responded. "Hoy-yo!" And so it went on through the night.

In Merawagi, news of the stranger who could bring fire from between his legs traveled very quickly, even at night, and when the sun filtered through the jungle the following morning, the presence of the Wgi was beyond all doubt, for there were not enough trees and ferns to hide all the men who had come to see the magic of the cloud-skinned man. Arms, legs, and bright, curious eyes shifted in the slanting shadows like strange new plants sprung in the night. Sitting on a folding chair brought with him over the mountains, Father Alex

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wore the look of one who had been up all night lighting fires. His hair was lank, his clothes disheveled, and in his lap he held an empty box of kitchen matches, the spent sticks of which lay scattered on the ground about his feet where Caspar, wearing his leather airman's cap despite the rich humidity, was rolling another cigarette, his expression no less devoid of wonder for all his lack of sleep. Beside his head, Father Alex's knee jerked reflexively as the missionary drifted from consciousness.

Skimming the shores of sleep, Father Alex mingled ideas for the future with reminiscences from his youth. Working in similar veins but opposite directions, his imagination dreamed up new entertainments to draw the Wagi from the bush, while his persistent memory dawned upon a moment of terrifying joy as he was spun weightlessly between his parents' outstretched arms, the unseen throngs beneath them rippling in collective awe. For Father Alex, too, had been an acrobat.

He had never gotten over the excitement of those days, the feeling of being at the center of things, held in wonder. Unforgotten were the lights, the cheers, the packed theaters and luminous tents from Almería to Zagreb where the Flying Marrats had entertained with feats of daring, spurred each season by the hungry throngs to ever greater heights. Neither his parents' passing, nor the edicts of the Brothers of Saint Augustine who clothed and fed him and forbade him to ever leap or spring or tumble, had been enough to extinguish the flame of those memories, for while life might be obliterated or denied, the thrill of the crowds could never be, lingering as it did in the faces of his classmates, colleagues, and parishioners.

The following evening, when again the fireflies rose from the tangle blinking and unblinking like a thousand eyes, Father Alex once more struck a match, and as before, the forest held its breath. Caspar, standing beside him in his flight cap and fatigues like a veteran of disaster, handed him another match when the first was spent. With this, Father Alex lit a lamp held aloft by one of the bearers, filling the surrounding jungle with first light and then exclamations of joy. Taking the lamp in his hand, he swung it over and around his head, spinning it into an image of the moon without its middle. On the third night, his face now grizzled with a blur of reddish whiskers and his eyes bloodshot from lack of rest, Father Alex began as before, but this time lit a second lamp, making two circles that joined and floated apart and spun inside one another like mother and child. On the walls of leaves encircling him, his shadow hovered and soared like a bird in flight.

The next evening the Wagi came and sat out in the open. They were

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short and dark and wore tubes of bamboo through their noses. Around their necks hung strings of shells and seeds, and some sported necklaces of human collarbone strung on braids of twine. From their woolly heads sprung feathers of cassowaries and birds of paradise, and around their waists were strapped belts of inlaid bark from which hung lap-laps of native cloth made supple with pig grease. Their faces were small and innocent, full of uneasy light, like children at a circus or some such awesome event for the first time. They sat in a close circle, hugging their knees, their longbows and stone axes laid at their feet, anxiously awaiting the show.

Father Alex did not disappoint them. In his display of lights, he lit three lamps, spinning them at the ends of lengths of rope to make circles and radiant designs tinted orange and indigo by his having painted the chimney glasses with Mercurochrome and iodine earier in the day. The Wagi sat speechless, letting out whimpers of pleasure as the colors wove themselves into ever more wondrous nebulas of light.

In the morning came the women, appearing from the bush wreathed in necklaces and carrying infants and striped piglets against their bare and pendulous breasts. Shy, they huddled tightly in a group, shielding eyes behind their hands. Caspar, squatting on large, mud-caked feet deformed from a lifetime of trudging in rain-drenched earth, his toes pointing in all directions like bulbs of ginger-root, observed the newcomers appraisingly from his master's side and drew his airman's goggles coolly over his eyes.

Five warriors wearing necklaces of collarbone stepped forward from the gathering, two of them taking piglets from the care of women and presenting them to Father Alex along with reddish brown pelts of tree kangaroo and opossum fur. Barely rising from his haunches, Caspar crept forward and collected the gifts into his care. "Now," he told Father Alex, caressing the scruffy piglets as gently as if they were his own children, "we give them gifts: gold jewelry, tobacco; New Guinea way."

But Father Alex was only half-listening, for this was the moment he had long been waiting for. He saw himself in the spotlight, all eyes upon him, with an opportunity to demonstrate his immediate worth — as he had worked it out — not as a tradesman, a bearer of gifts, but as a vehicle of truth and wonder. He checked his pockets to see that the bar of soap and tin of shoe polish he had put there two days ago were still in place, and finding that they were, stepped forward and presented his arm to the warriors, inviting them to touch his strange white skin. This they did with some reluctance, as though approaching an apparition in a dream, with fingers tremulous and hesitant, uncer-

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tain what to expect. They stroked the down on his forearm and, gaining courage, pinched his flesh, gripping him with solid hands as they tested the firmness of his muscle. Smiling nervously, they wagged their heads and clicked their tongues, speaking in guttural syllables that by inflection Father Alex understood to express puzzlement. It was then that he took the soap and shoe polish from his pocket, telling Caspar to go and fetch a potful of water. Carrying his pigs, Caspar rose silently and followed his instructions. As Father Alex spread a little polish on his arm, tinting a rectangle of his skin medium brown, the Wagi stiffened in perplexity.

"Tsah-yeee?" they looked at him. Around the forest's perimeter the other tribesmen craned their necks and inched a little closer, holding their arms and clutching tightly to their pigs and babies as if afraid of losing touch with their world. When Caspar returned with the water, Father Alex handed him the soap and told him to wash with it. After he had done so and the Wagi had seen that the soap had no effect on him, Father Alex scrubbed his own arm, restoring the paleness to his skin and proving the permanence of his flesh tone, that he was not an apparition of a trick of paint but simply a white-skinned man. The Wagi delighted in this invention and gathered around him in a dense, smoky-smelling cluster of feathers, bones, and radiant smiles. Father Alex held out the soap to the natives, and one of the warriors immediately snatched at it, popping the bar into the air as he tried to hold it fast. "Hola-jigi!" the people screamed with glee. Other warriors dove through the weeds to capture the soap, but they couldn't hold it either, slickened as it was by the undergrowth. Old men and young men joined in the chase, hurling themselves after the speedy little stone, yelping delightedly as it persistently eluded them, scattering before it scared and naked children as the soap grew smaller and smaller, vanishing eventually in a streak of foam.

Surrounded by grinning Wagi, Father Alex was inspected from head to foot. An old man bent down to feel for legs beneath his trousers, children explored his pockets, and three young men inspected his zipper in search of his power of light. Father Alex lit a match for them, and then another, striking the second on a stone. Squatting at his feet, unamazed by the startling turn of events, Caspar reached up and lit a cigarette. An old woman came and touched his goggles and ran her fingers over his leather earflaps. Like many of the women, she was missing the end of one of her fingers.

On the hillock overlooking the stretch of woods where he had received his beam of light, Father Alex

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staked the foundations for his mission. Sending his bearers back to the coast under Caspar's leadership for more supplies, Father Alex remained among the Wagi, entertaining them with lamps and mirrors until the men's return.

Except on broad, rain-soaked leaves and in stagnant pools, the Wagi had never seen themselves. For hours on end they gathered around the tree where Father Alex had nailed up his shaving mirror in a tidy frame, making faces and sticking out their tongues. In turn, the Wagi chieftains showed him their villages of thatch and woven-palm hovels, fortressed behind walls of sharpened sticks. By firelight they danced for him in their finest feathers, slaughtering pigs and beating drums through murky dawn. They invited him into their homes, offered him yams and fat white grubs roasted in banana leaves, and led him to the spirit houses, where women and children were forbidden to go. Inside, he encountered low, dark spaces blotchy with dead, leafy light and musky with the odors of animal fat and woodsmoke. There the chieftains puffed on cigars of native tobacco and showed him the skulls of their ancestors with jawbones tied lovingly in place and craniums rubbed smooth and brown from handling.

Once Caspar and the men had returned with the nails and tools they had been sent for, Father Alex built two enormous structures with their help, the first a church and the second a rectory in the style of a Swiss chalet, such as those in Montfeston. Monumental, the buildings were out of scale with anything the Wagi had ever seen. Of the two the church was easily the larger, constructed of unstripped timbers and so voluminous within that it resembled a circus tent with its chinks of light falling in shafts through the spanners of braided vine crisscrossing the roof. Half as large, the rectory had balconies all around, a wide roof, and a stone chimney rising at one end. By year's end the jungle below had been cleared and in its place stood a village of increasing size, spreading outward around a giant cross carved from the tree at whose base Father Alex had been standing when he first intrigued the Wagi with the lighting of a match. The hovels, still constructed of grass and palm, had assumed the look of chalets themselves, with broad, sloping roofs capable of sheltering their inhabitants from the unkown phenomenon of snow.

The church was filled each Sunday. Caspar translated the father's sermons, carried the incense and a heavy gilded cross, and wore a satin gown from beneath whose hem peaked his wayward toes. The center of attention, Father Alex could go nowhere without being followed. Each morning when he rose to do his calisthenics on the balcony of his chalet, a large crowd would assemble below to sit and watch.

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Over the months he introduced the Wagi to salt, sugar, tinned meat, and bush knives. From a chest of personal effects brought with him from Switzerland, he dispensed silver crucifixes to all those who had accepted baptism and could recite something of the rosary. These crosses the Wagi strung at once onto their necklaces along with their traditional seeds and shells. For the most part, Father Alex tried to keep a forward perspective and an open mind. Although he christened the village New Montfeston, he kept the past behind him, ignoring his old scrapbook when he discovered it at the bottom of the chest of crosses.

One morning as Father Alex was repeating a set of squat thrusts on the balcony outside his room, he looked down through the mist at the sleepy crowd assembled below and was suddenly possessed by a desire to bring them to life. What he wanted most of all was to surprise them with a back flip, but this he dared not try, for it had been far too many years since he accomplished one. And yet he felt fit and limber — with practice, he believed, the feat was within his grasp — although for now a handstand would have to do. Leaning forward like a sprinter at the starting line, he pressed his palms to the floor. Then with a sudden kick he was upside down, his toes pointing heavenward as he tested himself with a few paces forward and back.

"Ho-yaah?" the gathering awoke. "Haspa-giji, Father Alex!" It was an exclamation he had not heard in many weeks, not since he had drained one of the swamps with a stick of dhynamite, and the emotion of it sent a chill up his inverted spine. At the end of the balcony, Caspar sat on his heels smoking a cigarette, watching the goings-on in unmoved silence.

In the weeks that followed, Father Alex had the Wagi clear the swamp he'd drained and fill its sinkholes with tree trunks and rocks. While Caspar returned once more over the mountains for supplies, Father Alex and his corps of tribal helpers lined the clearing with stones whitewashed with lime. This time when Caspar returned, he carried with him, in addition to a number of boxes containing tobacco and newspaper, a strange black box, a spool of unusual twine, and a long silver spear that Father Alex erected on the roof of his house. Two days later there came a sound like thunder, and out of the clouds appeared a huge, shimmery bird that roared down swiftly over the trees. Father Alex, who had by now learned a few words of Wagi, assured his people that there was no danger and that the giant bird was nothing more than an airplane. When the airplane landed and spat out a man with white skin and huge black eyes, everybody ran. Among the natives only Caspar,

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who had seen planes and bombs and Americans in dark glasses during the war and to whom all things were possible and hence not worth the wonder, remained on the airstrip, squatting on his big round feet and rolling himself a cigarette. The pilot's name was Chip Willig. He wore a pink shirt and baggy trousers and handed out sticks of chewing gum every time he shook someone's hand.

In the next months, Chip Willig's airplane disgorged cases of tinned meat, sacks of sugar and salt, and a big greasy thing that looked like the mouth of an airplane and made about as much noise. Attached to wires, the generator gave light to lamps without the use of matches. Chuck Willig also brought a strange brown animal called a cow. The cow had teeth on its head and made unhappy sounds.

As each of these wonders was revealed, more and more Wagi settled in New Montfeston. Soon the population was so large that hardly a week could go by without a birth or death. The funerals were always elaborate, extending for days beyond Father Alex's services for the deceased. In mourning, scores of relatives would go about with faces and bodies streaked with ash, and if the deceased was a man, his wife and daughters would roll in mud puddles and cut off the end of a finger in ritual demonstration of their despair.

On the hill the church continued to be well attended, with parishioners squatting on the benches and crowding every pew. Caspar's two little pigs grew into giants and gave birth to a dozen more. At night the guide slept in his musty room off the kitchen, atop boxes of tobacco and newspaper and the cases of costume jewelry he had first brought with him from Port Moresby and for which Father Alex had never had a second thought. His importance withered, Caspar decided to take a wife. He asked for Father Alex's blessings and, roping together ten of his fattest pigs, went down to the village along with his boxes of jewelry to buy a young bride. The woman he bought was small and slim, with catlike eyes and pointed breasts. Her name was Kumalai and she was the daughter of an important chief. Taking time off from a venture to build a bridge over the Merawagi, Father Alex performed the wedding rites in a church filled with tribesmen with painted faces and unusually rich decorations of feathers and erotic-looking flowers.

For twelve days afterward the drums didn't stop beating in New Montfeston. Bonfires sparked the night, and voices chanted endless throbbing rhythms from dusk to dawn. It occurred then to Father Alex, sitting alone in his folding chair at one end of his living room, that he had not come quite as far as he had begun to believe, that he was in many respects still at the beginning. He had built his church and set an example

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for the Wagi by performing good deeds — draining the swamp and beginning the bridge — and he had taught them the meaning of God, the love of the Holy Virgin, and the planting of lima beans and corn, but here they were leaping around fires and turning their world upside down just as if nothing had changed, as if time, having slipped forward, had in turn slipped back.

On the eleventh day of bedlam, the airplane arrived with a shipment of clothes and Father Alex invited Chip Willig up for tea. Chip had a large, ruddy face, and his hair was cut close and flat across the top of his head.

"Doublemint, Padre?" he offered. Father Alex shook his head and poured tea. At the bottom of the hill, visible from where they sat out on the balcony, wooden totems erected in the past few days stood like phallic monuments at the entrance of the village.

"I thought I was making progress," Father Alex confided, folding his hands around his teacup. "Just as I begin to believe that they understand and are beginning to put things together for themselves, *Boom!* — they are beating their drums and cutting off the tips of their fingrs in grief. I can't help but think they keep their spirit houses hidden somewhere in the bush, worshiping their skulls on weekdays and praying to God on the Sabbath."

Chip Willig pushed his sunglasses higher on his nose. "Forget it, Padre. Old habits die hard. Way I look at it is, you're lucky. No cargo cult, nobody building bamboo planes. No head-hunting or any of this tribal warfare business with the bows and arrows. They like you, you're interesting, and they stick around. I've been places where the mission's like a ghost town."

"I suppose I should be grateful."

"Grateful? That's the word! Why, one slip and you'd have been back where you started long ago. You're doing great."

When the drums stopped thumping, Caspar built himself a modest chalet at the foot of the hill. He continued to assist Father Alex in matters outside the church, but he no longer carried the heavy metal cross or wore his satin robe, preferring to sit with his wife in the front row during the services, watching his former master with complacent eyes, calm and unamazed, his airman's cap strapped on his head.

Now Chip Willig's plane brought a tractor, tins of sardines, a machine that made ice. Hundreds gathered around the rectory to receive a piece of the cold white stone, and many attempted to carry the prize to distant villages to trade for pigs and yams. With the bridge over the Merawagi complete, more people settled in New Montfeston and went to work for Fa-

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ther Alex, building roads across the valley and into the hills. He paid his workers in shirts and trousers and women's underwear, and soon only the old and lazy were without clothes. The Wagi, however, remained shoeless, for, like Caspar, their feet were flat and misshapen from walking in mud and would fit into nothing smaller than the boxes the shoes came in.

As Caspar's old costume jewelry was traded throughout the community and his in-laws became wealthy in pigs, the former jewelry of seeds and shells was given over to the children, traded to neighboring tribes, lost, or secreted away. There were times when the people would return to their old ways of dressing, as when torrential rains made clothes too heavy to wear, but these periods became history when the airplane unloaded a crate of Hong Kong umbrellas.

Then came a morning when Father Alex looked down from the balcony of his chalet, draped now like the downed Japanese airplane he had encountered four years earlier in the jungle in orchids and vines, and saw that no one was watching him.

Each week in church he began to notice fewer parishioners. The crowds that came to the airstrip whenever a plane dropped in dispersed soon afterward unless something truly unusual was unloaded. Already the Wagi had tired of running alongside the tractor and picking up handfuls of grass to feed the cow. Walking through New Montfeston one afternoon, Father Alex discovered abandoned houses, their walls like skeletons, their insides rooted out by pigs. Rumors spread that the trails to the coast, unused since the coming of the airplane, were choked in vines and impossible to follow. With his projects at a standstill for lack of interest, Father made fewer orders for supplies and Chip Willig descended from the sky only once in a great while.

Depressed, Father Alex sat in his folding chair and listened to the news on the radio. There were wars in three parts of the world, volcanoes erupting along the coast, and at Bulolo, villagers at a Lutheran mission had thrown off their clothes and painted themselves with charcoal dust and attacked the local commissary with axes after the proprietor had accidently run over a neighbor's pig. "Time goes backward," Father Alex shook his head, recalling Caspar's wedding. The past was always there, haunting and persistent, inescapable as his own self. Returning to his room, he sat on his bed to read, searching through an old chest of trinkets and personal belongings for a diverting book. Near the bottom of the trunk, he discovered his old scrapbook, untouched in years, and digging it out he reread the clippings of his parents' exploits for the fiftieth time, the descriptions of their astounding feats

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and the enthusiastic receptions of the crowds. As he read, he couldn't help but recall that strange and wonderful morning when he had awed the Wagi with a handstand outside his room. A simple handstand and a few steps forward and back. Father Alex never finished reading the scrapbook. His mind spinning with ideas, he bolted from his room and hurried down the hill to have a word with Caspar.

Except at Mass, Father Alex now saw Caspar only on occasion, usually strolling in the sun or rain with his newborn son cradled in his arms, three squealing pigs at his heels, and his wife, Kumalai, sheltering the six of them from the elements beneath a big black umbrella. On this afternoon, Father Alex found Kumalai sitting on the balcony of Caspar's chalet, breast-feeding Solomon, their son. Kumalai wore a red skirt, a striped blouse open in front, and a ladies' sun hat adorned with feathers. In modesty she turned herself from Father Alex and faced the wall. "Caspar," she said over her shoulder, "is sitting inside."

Father Alex knocked and entered. The door had no hinges, and he had to shift it aside and lean it against the wall. Caspar was sitting on a cardboard box, all that remained of his tobacco and newspaper. His monumental hands rested on his knees, and a cigarette glowed warmly at his fingertips.

"Afternoon, Father," he said without surprise, as if he had been expecting him. For want of a better place to sit, Father Alex squatted on the floor.

"Caspar," he began, "I have come for your help. Perhaps you have noticed that the Wagi come less and less to Mass, that they have tired of the modern ways, and that it is only a matter of time before they will abandon them altogether. I know you have a wife and family now, but I refuse to surrender to the past. I have an idea, Caspar, an idea to bring the Wagi back, to fill the church again so that they might receive God's message and be saved. Are you with me?"

Caspar extinguished his cigarette on the leathery sole of one of his feet. "Please you give me hundreds of boxes of tobacco and matches," he said offhandedly, "and some also of newspaper."

Father Alex kneaded his hands and flexed his powerful arms within his sleeves. "Agreed," he said, his eyes unfocused, reflective — his mind already somewhere else.

The following Sunday, after a sermon on the wonder of Creation as proof of the greatness of the Lord, Father Alex did a handstand by the altar. Then he laid a plank across a log and stood on one end while Caspar climbed the lectern and jumped down on the other, catapulting Father Alex several feet into the air, his arms

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churning like the wings of a bird of paradise. The congregation was struck in awe. "Hi-yeee!" they exclaimed, "Ho-yaah!" — their sense of wonder suddenly relit.

For the first time in months, the church was filled the following week. Father Alex executed a handstand, and Caspar jumped from the lectern, sending his master high in the air. "Haspadidee!" cried the crowd. They filed out noisily, and the next week the church was filled again. Father Alex repeated his handstand and catapult act at the end of the service, and then everyone left, this time quieter and more reserved. The following week he would have to try something more impressive. He went back to the scrapbook and began to read.

That Sunday, Father Alex attempted a somersault off the catapult and barely made it. "Hoya-chipeee!" roared the Wagi, dressed for the occasion in their finest dresses and shirts. Father Alex practiced all the next week and on Sunday attempted a back flip and landed squarely on his feet. The Wagi went wild. They stomped their feet and clapped their hands and came back the following week for more.

As the weeks progressed, Father Alex graduated from single to double somersaults and from the catapults to an improvised trapeze of braided twine hung from the rafters. His services were filled to capacity, with mobs of tribesmen forced to view the proceeding from the doors, and countless children peeking in through chinks in the rough-hewn walls. New Montfeston came to life again, swelling to unprecedented bounds as those who had left returned from the mountains and newcomers arrived from the bush, naked and wearing tubes of bamboo through their noses. To this last group, Father Alex awarded dresses and trousers so that they could join the others in one of each Sunday's two masses. From the pulpit he preached on the love of God and martyrdom of Christ, who gave his life so that all men could live forever in his kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven. Father Alex discussed miracles and faith, and when he had spoken and recited from the Bible, the Wagi would watch as he climbed to the roof beams in his satin robes to leap and tumble while Caspar, his pliant feet wrapped around the ropes, would swing and catch him in his powerful hands. But although the church was filled beyond his wildest hopes, his congregation somber through his services and ecstatic through the grande finale, hi-yooing and clapping their hands, Father Alex could not rest easy, for the Wagi quickly grew accustomed to these goings-on and expected more each week, something bolder and more daring every time. He returned constantly to his scrapbook, progressing a page or two at a time; he searched his heart for courage, sounded his soul for strength, and

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stayed up until all hours practicing with Caspar in their illuminated church.

Although Chip Willig did descend from the clouds to deliver a dozen boxes of tobacco and matches, the promised newspaper never arrived. Caspar, however, said nothing, smoking what he had with unswerving lack of wonder, as if he had seen all of this before. As ever, he walked in the sun and rain with his wife and child and entourage of hogs and from the flying trapeze caught Father Alex as he spun and flipped through the weeks.

Rapidly, Father Alex was nearing the end of his scrapbook. He knew how the final articles read, but he moved toward their conclusion a page at a time, hoping for a miracle. Time was passing at a dizzying rate. It had taken his parents years to progress from catapults to the trapeze to multiple somersaults without a safety net, and here he had done the same in a little more than one year, spurred by an audience that was somehow more demanding, having heads like stone and not knowing the limits of human capability.

Late one night, Father Alex went to the church and knelt down before the altar and prayed to the Holy Virgin to give him strength and release him from the closing circle of events. That Sunday he would attempt the rare and difficult triple somersault. May his parents and their sacred memory rest in peace.

Falling over the heads of the natives crowded in the doorway of the church, a beam of light burned in the cloud of dust where Father Alex lay, his gown darkening with blood. Overhead, Caspar swung to a stop like a pendulum knocked out of balance, his extended hands clenching on nothing. No one moved. Time was momentarily at a standstill.

For twelve days and twelve nights, the drums did not stop beating in New Montfeston. In their grief, hundreds of Wagi women sliced off the tips of their left index fingers and descended upon what was left of the swamps to roll in the mud. Others, both men and women alike, streaked their faces with ashes and beat their heads against the ground, and to mournful chants the entire populace circled a smoldering fire, their bodies stripped to ritual feathers and paint. From the edge of the firelight, Caspar watched and smoked.

Propped in his folding chair, Father Alex grew fat and sour. His radio repeated his name, but he did not answer. Unmilked, his cow died a painful death. One morning Caspar dug a hole and filled it with rocks. Five Wagi warriors carried a bundle from the rectory, and Caspar was seen descending from the balcony with a book larger than a Bible under his arm.

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When Chip Willig roared down over the trees, everyone feared that he had come for revenge, or worse, to take away Father Alex's body, leaving his spirit without bones to live in. They were afraid his ghost, at large in the world, would turn its powers of weightlessness against them, sending everyone spinning hopelessly skyward. Caspar assured them no such thing would happen. He met Chip Willig on the airstrip.

"Where's Father Alex?" Chip Willig asked. his glasses were dark and his eyes were invisible. A few dozen Wagi sat self-consciously about the airstrip, trying to look unconcerned. Hidden in an adjoining grove of pandanus palms, a hundred Wagi warriors trained their arrows on the pilot. Caspar told him Father Alex had died of illness, and led him to the grave of stones.

When they got there, Caspar knelt down and said, "Now we say a prayer," and Chip Willig, his body huge like a tree, hunkered to his knees and removed his dark glasses. *"Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,"* the native began. "We pray for Father Alex, who is buried under these stones, so that he enters the Kingdom of Heaven and that no one will try and take him from this hole like we promised him we would not let happen. Father Alex was a good man, please you let him into your house. *As it was in the beginning, is now, and forever will be, world without end. Amen."*

For a moment both men were silent, then they stood and started down the hill. Chip Willig slid his glasses back on his nose and ran his hand over the flat top of his head. "I'm real sorry," he said; "I know you were real close. Heck, if there's anything I can do, well, you just let me know." When they got to the airplane, Caspar asked him if he could bring some newspaper the next time up. The pilot nodded distractedly and looked at the thickening clouds. He shook Caspar's hand and passed him a pack of gum. Caspar put the gum in his pocket and lit a cigarette rolled in cracked and yellowed newsprint.

In the forest, the Wagi warriors turned away their arrows as the airplane vanished. That night they spread into the hills, attacking an isolated village in retaliation for the sorcery many believed was responsible for the father's death. Killing three men, the tribesmen butchered their victims and devoured their heads.

Two months later, Father Alex's skull found its way into the spirit house that the Wagi had maintained all along in a pocket of forest half a mile east of the church. The jaw, with its strange gold teeth, was tied respectfully in place with a braid of twine. Passed from hand to hand the cranium grew smooth and brown. Heavy and fresh, the men who handled it said they could feel its power.

When the airplane returned, it de-

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livered a new pastor but no newspaper. The new father's name was Father Rinaldi. Father Rinaldi was dark and round and he had been in New Guinea for fifteen years. He swept away the cobwebs from the church and chased the pigs from the rectory, which like the other building was sinking steadily into the rain-drenched earth. Insects bored through the woodwork, opossums slept in the eaves. To Father Rinaldi's surprise, however, when Sunday arrived he found the church was full. Caspar volunteered to help.

The Wagi sat patiently through the service, but once it was over they remained in their seats. "That's all," said Father Rinaldi. "They may go." Caspar translated the message to the assembly, but nobody moved.

"Well," said the new pastor, "what are they waiting for?"

Caspar wouldn't say. Calmly, he rolled himself a cigarette. The paper again was yellow and cracked. Down the length of the cigarette appeared a headline in French announcing the appearance of the Flying Marrats that night at the Circus Giscard. There, the article began, the Marrats would attempt a feat all of Europe ws waiting for, the rare and treacherous triple somersault. The article was from the second to last page of Father Alex's scrapbook. In another day or two, if he didn't get more newspaper, Caspar would have to roll his cigarettes in leaves as he used to in the time before the Australians and Americans when his head was like a stone. The idea didn't really bother him, for in his short life he had seen everything, and if men wished to cross the earth to kill each other or trek through the jungle to raid each other's villages, stand on their heads or leap around fires, who was he to wonder if at the end he found himself once more at the beginning?

Meanwhile, Father Rinaldi waited for the Wagi, and the Wagi waited for their triple somersault, and the church and the rectory sunk a little deeper into the earth, were consumed by termites, and buried in orchids and vines. Slowly, the jungle devoured them, just as smoke consumed the headline on Caspar's cigarette, a process commenced only an instant before by the simple and miraculous act of lighting a match.

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Friends have to stick together, especially in the face of disaster. "Outsider" is a story of a man, confronted by the end of the world, who naturally turns to his "friends" to help him cope with surviving. It has been some years since Robert J. Tilley has had a story in F & SF, *yet "Outsider" is a story worth waiting for and marks a welcome return.*

Outsider

BY

ROBERT J. TILLEY

At first sighting, Marcus estimated that the pub was about three-quarters of a mile away, roughly equidistant from the hills that formed the flanks of the small valley in which it sat in shadowed isolation. He spotted it as they crested the southern range; a fairly substantial building, its details rapidly becoming obscured by the gathering dusk. There was still sufficient daylight, though, to permit identification; the parking lot beside it, fronted by its supplementary sign, the garden and white tables at its rear.

Good timing, he thought, relieved. There was a chill in the air, and clouds were beginning to thicken darkly above the eastern horizon. Despite its bleakly inevitable lack of welcoming occupants, the pub still generated associations of warmth and relaxed conviviality, a friendly refuge.

Some of its contents would probably prove to be distasteful, of course, they could be removed and evidence of their presence at least partially disguised. The smell of disinfectant was something that he accepted as an essential part of their world now.

They were roughly a third of the way down the gently coiling road when the light appeared, a small patch of brightness that winked into sudden existence at the side of the building facing their line of approach.

Marcus's first thought was that it was simply an open window catching the last rays of the almost vanished sun; a final trace of the dying day, briefly captured by the angle of the glass. But as remnants of daylight continued to fade and the sun finally slid below the curving line of the hills, the light grew brighter, a small, enigmatic rectangular beacon that gra-

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dually caused him to drift to a halt at the edge of the road.

The building was barely visible now, blurred to a misshapen shadow in the gloom, the light the only certain evidence of its location. He said, frowning, "There's someone down there. There's no other explanation." He bit his lip. "Is there?"

Paul said, "No. There's been no power of any kind for more than two months now. It's most probably an oil lamp. Whatever it is, somebody had to light it."

"What about an auxiliary generator?"

Paul shrugged. "Same thing. It would still need someone to operate it. And the light came on only a couple of minutes ago."

Marcus nodded, his initial sense of shock already subsiding. He knew that he could always rely on Paul to rationalize things, stay cool and unflurried in the face of the unanticipated. Although he vaguely tended to think of himself as the leader of the trio, he relied on the strengths of the others to bolster his own impetuosity and fits of depression. He'd often reflected that without them he very probably wouldn't have survived as long as he had. But Paul's steadiness and common sense and Alan's ability to detect the bizarre humor of their situation continued to hold at bay the despair that ceaselessly prowled around the perimeter of his consciousness.

"Female?" Alan speculated. "Tallish, but not exactly Amazonian, preferably blonde, in her late twenties? Attractive, of course, and an enterprising cook."

Marcus smiled. "And with the right sense of humor, of course."

"You mean she'd have to laugh at your jokes. Oh, essential."

Marcus continued to smile wryly. The chances of their meeting such an idealized companion were woefully improbable, of course. There had been women among the handful of survivors that they'd encountered since beginning the trek north, but none of them had remotely resembled Alan's flippantly sardonic specification. A capacity for survival was all that mattered now, the ability to adapt, to manufacture and preserve some kind of tolerable existence in the aftermath of disaster.

He flexed his shoulders, easing the pressure of the pack and bedroll where they lay heavily across his back.

"Whoever it is, they have to be immune, I suppose. I wonder if there's more than one?"

Paul said, "There might be. There's no guarantee that they'll welcome strangers, either. Remember what's happened before. They might think that we're carriers. Better keep the gun handy."

Marcus nodded again, wriggled free of the pack, and took the gun from it. The metal felt hard and dependable against his hand. He un-

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zipped his jacket and wedged the gun behind his belt at his left side, its butt facing forward. He zippered his jacket again, then eased the pack back on. It was almost dark now, a moonless, cold evening with a touch of rawness in the air.

"Right, then. Let's see what we've got here."

An erratic breeze was funneling through the valley as they reached level ground. The stench of manure could still be detected there, to some extent masking the other smells brought to them on the gusting wind.

At least the darkness hid the source, Marcus thought. He'd learned to detect the subtle differences by now, the somehow coarser pungency of animal decomposition as compared with its human counterpart. In his mind's eye he visualized the occupants of the surrounding fields; most of them, perhaps all, reduced to scattered mounds of putrefaction, their slow disintegration unaided by the traditional visitations of scavengers whose own ranks had been brutally decimated to a handful of cautiously selective survivors, instinctively mistrustful of infected flesh. Animal and bird still bred, but it would be a long time before some semblance of normality returned to field and woodland and sky. Cities and towns, too, he supposed, although they didn't really matter anymore. Perhaps it will be their world now, he thought. Perhaps humankind will simply fade away, increasingly insulated from the possibility of continuity by its terror of contagion, ironically doomed to extinction by its capacity for reasoned fear.

There was some kind of vehicle parked in the shadows beside the pub. He saw its dully metallic glint as they passed the parking lot and approached the building, their footsteps muffled by the grass fringe beside the road.

The curve of the road had taken them some way to its right. From this adjusted angle of approach, Marcus saw that in fact three windows were illuminated; the one that they had first seen, located in the side of the building, and two others at its left front center, previously hidden. He could see the lighted room now bathed in the whitish glow of the lamp that sat on a table directly adjacent to the front corner window. At first no one was visible, then a shadow drifted across the far side of the room and a figure moved briefly into view before vanishing again, concealed by the corner wall.

A woman? The sighting had lasted no more than a second, but he'd caught a glimpse of what could have been long, dark hair. Meaningless, he told himself. His own hair was almost shoulder-length by now. The others maintained the same relatively neat styles that they'd affected throughout their acquaintance, a consistency of image that he found reassuring in a

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way but simultaneously interpreted as a silent reproof aimed at his own more casual attitude toward such things. He frequently told himself that he ought to copy their example, despite there being little real point in such adherence to the old normality.

But that wasn't important just now. He hesitated, uncertain of their next move.

Paul whispered, "Better get a closer look. We can't really see enough from here." They moved sideways, avoiding the pool of light, then toward the corner of the building. Marcus leaned against the wall, peering cautiously through the front corner window.

He was looking into what was plainly the barroom. The woman was seated on a barstool, her back toward them. She was fairly slim, the belted coat she was wearing shaped to contours confirming her gender. Black, slightly wavy hair hung loosely down her back and across her shoulders. Her elbows were on the bartop, her hands hidden in front of her. Without being able to see them, Marcus guessed that she was holding a glass. As far as he could detect, there was no one else in the room.

He felt a tremor of unease. The tableau beyond the window had a bizarre, almost waxworks quality about it, he thought. It was like an almost too precise scene of another kind of reality that lived only in the memory: the clean, orderly setting warmed by the light of the lamp; the woman at the bar, the pose that she must have adopted at the moment of their arrival.

Perhaps she wasn't the one that he'd seen. There could be other people in there, undetectable from where he stood. He ducked down and moved along the wall to the farther window, but even this extension of his viewpoint failed to reveal anyone else in the room.

It was as though she was waiting for someone, he thought. He glanced uncertainly behind him, squinting into the surrounding gloom. Apart from the lighted windows, the darkness was almost total now, the only sound the occasional sigh of the wind as it brushed past the walls of the building.

Paul whispered, "Check around the side. We'll get a better view there." They moved quietly around the corner, simultaneously stepping back several yards into the shadows beyond the throw of light.

Marcus stared through the side window, seeing the woman in profile now. This adjusted view appeared to confirm her solitude, but her face was indistinct, shadowed by the lamp behind her and partially masked by the curtain of hair. He could see the glass now, clasped between her hands where they rested on the bar; a tumbler, its dully amber contents almost reaching the brim.

They moved away from the window again, carefully circumnavigated

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the building, then returned to their starting point and conferred.

Despite the element of unreality, it was cautiously accepted that there was no logical reason for supposing that the situation contained any kind of genuine risk. Their inspection of the rear and farther side of the premises had failed to find any other lighted windows or additional evidence of occupancy, so it seemed reasonable to assume that the woman was alone as she appeared to be. And in the by now improbable event that she was a carrier, Paul pointed out, their own immunity had long proved itself to be an established fact.

But prudence would still be advisable. Marcus should go in alone while he and Alan remained hidden until the position became clear. The woman's response to any new presence could range from terror to abject relief, and the arrival of an individual ostensibly posed less of a threat than that of a group

Marcus allowed his initial reluctance to be overcome by this reasoned argument. Too, the wind had risen and was already cutting searchingly through his clothing. It would be a relief to be indoors, sheltered by the thick stone walls. He took a deep breath, and walked around the corner to the front of the building while the others melted into darkness.

The door creaked as he opened it, and the lamp flickered, its flame stirred by the inrush of air. The woman swung around, her face drawn and startled. Marcus was disappointed to see that she was older than her rear view had led him to believe; certainly well past forty. It was a sallow, pouchy face, patterned with fretful lines. She wore lipstick, dark against the pale skin.

They stared at one another for several seconds, Marcus politely guarded, the woman poised and wide-eyed. The glass in her hand slopped some of its contents onto the top of the bar, creating a slowly spreading pool.

"Don't be alarmed," Marcus said. He placatingly lifted a hand, pushing the door closed behind him. "There's nothing to be frightened of. I wasn't expecting to find anyone around here." His voice sounded all right, he decided; calm and reassuring. He carefully shrugged out of his backpack and placed it on a bench beside him, conscious of the gun against his side. He and the woman were the only people in the room, but a door beyond the end of the bar counter was open, leading into an unlit corridor. He stayed where he was, lifting both hands now. "There's nothing to worry about. Really."

The woman said, "Who are you?" Some of the shock was leaving her face, but her voice was thick with barely disguised tension. It was a north-country voice, heavily accented. Her back view really had been misleading, Marcus thought. As well

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as being older than he'd anticipated, he'd somehow pictured someone less coarse-featured. She didn't look particularly intelligent, he decided. She could be a little drunk, too.

He kept his hands open and raised, carefully manufacturing a smile. "My name's Aitken. Marcus Aitken. I'm on my way up to Edinburgh. I have — " He corrected himself. "I had relatives there. I want to find out if any of them are still alive."

The woman said, after a pause, "I didn't hear any car."

Hadn't she made any kind of logical deduction regarding his backpack? Obviously not. Well, it confirmed his estimate of how bright she was. He continued to smile. "I'm walking. I never learned to drive."

"Are you on your own?"

He hesitated only fractionally before replying. Better not bring the others in just yet, he thought. She might accept their presence, even be relieved by the time-honored concept of safety in numbers, but he couldn't be sure. She could react with alarm, feel more threatened, and like some of the others that they'd met, be panicked into doing something foolish or dangerous. He had no way of knowing whether or not she carried any kind of weapon.

"Yes. There aren't many people left anywhere now. The ones I've met just seem to want to stay where they are." Careful, he thought. That could be interpreted as a kind of criticism, potentially dangerous ground. "It's understandable, of course. They're used to being in certain places, that kind of thing." He shrugged and slowly brought his hands down. "Look, there's no need to be frightened of me. All I want to do is sleep here tonight. Would you mind if I do that?"

She continued to stare at him, fixedly. Her eyes were no longer startled, but something else was growing there, a kind of hungry speculation.

She ignored his question. "I can drive. I've got a car outside. I could take you to Edinburgh."

This abrupt acceptance and invitation jarred him badly. *Damn*, he thought, dismayed. Perhaps he should have told her about the others straightaway, after all. But it was always difficult to know what was best in such a situation. Each stranger was an unknown quantity, an unpredictable and potentially risky intrusion into their world, and previous encounters had sometimes gone badly when their group presence had been realized.

I'd better not tell her just yet, he thought. Such an abrupt reversal of his claim to solitariness would be bound to invoke instant mistrust. He'd better establish some kind of relationship first, attempt to manufacture an area of common ground before tactfully revealing their presence.

But there was no question of her joining them, he thought. Apart from her age and appearance, he could

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sense the total absence of rapport between them. He'd learned to detect such things long ago, as far back as his early childhood, and his ensuing limited relationships had always been dictated by his instinct in such things. Their meeting could have spanned only a minute or two so far, but already he knew that she was a creature responsive to a different code of signals, the possessor of criteria alien to that of himself and the others.

He smiled again. "That's very kind of you." He looked around the bar. "Is this where you were living when it happened?"

She slowly shook her head, "I'm from Bolton."

"Did you know anybody here?"

She shook her head again. There was a shadow of color in her face now. "No. I was just driving. I got here two days ago."

"Were there many survivors in Bolton?"

The color went again, abruptly. Her face trembled, suddenly slack and lost. She began to cry.

He stayed where he was, further dismayed. He'd never been able to cope with tears and the appalling loss of control prompted by their activation. He thought briefly about his wife and their eventually disastrous relationship; the mutual death of understanding, punctuated by complaints and recriminations. And always tears. It's a weapon, really, he thought. They know we can't handle it when they cry. He remained tactfully still and silent as the woman began to talk, her voice thick and halting at first but gradually resolving into a dull, hurting whine.

He listened to her catalog of personal-disaster with part of his mind, but principally was reflecting with relief on his own circumstances. It was hard to see any really acceptable future, but compared with most of the people that he'd encountered since it had all happened, his luck had been incredible. Despite their tentative deductions, he still didn't know for sure why he and Paul and Alan should have remained immune, but the passage of time had established it as a fact, now proven beyond all doubt.

All around him, people had died; slow, suffering ends most of them, as the virus permeated their systems, first inducing fever, then dehydration and eventual death. His wife had been an early victim, a shock that had been smothered by the magnitude of what was happening everywhere. For days he'd wandered the northern suburbs of London, desperately seeking familiar faces among the steadily dwindling handful of survivors that he found; some of them, like him, searching for family or friends or acquaintances, the majority locked away in what had become private fortresses against the unbelievable horror of it all, their presences betrayed only by a half-seen face at a window, an occa-

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sional moving curtain.

He'd been near total despair when Paul and Alan appeared. They'd arrived one evening, after he'd returned to the flat at the end of another fruitless day; an instinctive homing ritual, meaningless in itself, but one that could have meant their never locating each other if he had lapsed into the kind of rootless wandering practiced by some.

Their presence was like a sudden shaft of daylight entering his dark existence. Both unmarried, Paul and Alan had been on a walking tour of Wales when the virus swept like an unseen shadow across the country and the world. The holiday had been an annual get-together in which he normally joined, but pressure of work had made it impossible on that last occasion. They'd spent a week, they told him, doing what they could for local victims before the scale of hopelessness of the task became evident. Then they had split up and gone to their parents' homes, but rejoined forces shortly afterward when the pointlessness of this filial loyalty had been proved. It was then that they decided to look for him in the all too probably vain hope that he, too, had somehow survived.

They'd laughed and talked, his own laughter near hysteria initially, but gradually subsiding to normality as he grew to accept the blessed fact of their reunion. They were both plainly shaken by their experience, but neither had really changed: Paul, fundamentally serious but with a dry, precisely worded sense of humor; Alan the extrovert, the compulsive conversationalist, the more overtly comic. They'd gravitated toward each other during their college days; an unlikely alliance in some respects, but one that they collectively found pleasurable, and after graduating they'd made it a point to stay in touch over the intervening years.

Their survival, like his, remained unexplained, but a solitary clue had existed from the start. Both he and Paul had AB positive blood, an oddity that they'd learned during their last year in college after deciding that actual donation was the only way to overcome their mutual aversion to a form of public service that they found commendable. It had become something of a running joke that they periodically teased one another with; blood brothers, they'd called themselves. At the time Alan had been unable to overcome his own squeamishness, and his blood category remained unknown. Could he, too, belong to this same relatively rare group? They'd speculated endlessly on the freakishness of such a coincidence, the only straw of possibility that offered itself, while simultaneously accepting that explanations were of no real importance. All that did matter, they'd agreed, was that they were together, sustaining each other through the nightmare, repelling it with their

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companionship and unwavering compatability.

The woman's voice had leveled to a monotone now, heavy with exhaustion that was largely emotional. Eventually she stopped talking, the sound petering to silence. She stared past him, her face streaked and her eyes dull and blind.

She's talked herself out, he thought. Now would be the best time to tell her. He said gently, "It's a terrible thing, being alone, I know." He looked around the bar. "This is a nice place. I can see why you decided to stay here for a while." He walked a little ways away from her, unzipping his coat and glancing at the empty tables and seats. He turned, spreading his hands. "Look, I must tell you. I didn't tell you before, because I thought you'd be more scared. I have two friends with me. We decided it would be best if they waited outside until I'd talked to you and made you realize that there wasn't anything to be frightened of. You aren't frightened anymore, are you?" She didn't reply, simply stared blankly at him. Did she understand what he was saying? he wondered. "I'll fetch them. It's getting pretty cold outside. They'll be glad to get indoors."

He went to the door, conscious of her eyes following his carefully unhurried movements. He opened it and looked out into the darkness. "It's all right. You can come in now."

They emerged out of the gloom and went past him into the bar. He shut the door and turned, gesturing introductions. "This is Paul, and this is Alan. We were friends at college. We still don't know why we all — " He stopped.

The woman left her stool and was stepping sideways through the open counterflap, her head turned in their direction, her eyes flickering restlessly. She reached below the counter, and the twin barrels of a shotgun appeared above its far edge.

He fumbled the gun from his belt and fired, crouching. His first shot missed, but the explosion and the shattering glass behind her panicked the woman into half turning away, her eyes squeezed closed. His second shot threw her against the rear wall, dislodging more bottles. She fell, disappearing beneath the counter. A brief silence was broken as another bottle slid free of its holder and dropped, making a soft, muffled sound on landing.

It must have fallen on her, he thought. He remained crouching, the gun stretched out in front of him, listening for any further sign of movement. There was no sound of any kind. Still pointing the gun, he went behind the counter. The woman lay on her stomach, her head twisted sideways in a reeking pool of spirits, the barrels of the shotgun projecting from beneath her body. He could see the bullet hole, a dark opening in the side of her head, partially concealed

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by strands of her hair.

He swallowed his revulsion and disappointment. He hadn't wanted anything like this to happen, but already he was used to it in a way. People's responses had become increasingly irrational since the disaster. It could be just normal fear, he supposed, but alternatively it might mean that they hadn't fully escaped the effects of the virus after all. Perhaps some individuals had avoided death only to have their minds harmed in some way; a kind of insanity that was the price to be paid for staying alive.

Paul and Alan came out from where they'd taken shelter, and consoled him, pointing out that he'd had no choice. In fact, the shotgun, on inspection, turned out to be empty, but he'd had no way of knowing that. They left the bar and went upstairs, relieved to find no other bodies and no lingering odor of decomposition. The beds were neatly made and rooms clean; evidence of some final gesture of refusal to accept the inevitability of a disordered end. He wondered where the people were who'd run the place, where exactly it was that they'd died. Not that it mattered, of course. Location was one of the least important aspects of death.

He slumped tiredly onto one of the beds, thinking about the woman. For a brief moment, just prior to their actual meeting, the possibility had existed that he and the others had found a companion to share the curtailments of their existence, to round out the question of human needs. But she hadn't been right, he knew. Instinct had told him of the absence of compatability, that the kind of empathetic relationship that they sought had once again been no more than a dream.

He pulled the covers over him and drifted into sleep, lulled by the gusting wind outside the bedroom window.

On the following morning they breakfasted in the kitchen, augmenting their own supplies with the few edible items that they found. They briefly discussed the events of the evening, but it was generally agreed that there would be no point in burying the body. After all, she was simply one of countless millions, and what had happened had been unavoidable.

They left by the rear entrance and walked away from the building, heading toward the low range of hills on the far side of the valley. It was a bright, clear day, with a faint breeze the only reminder of the previous evening's sharp-edged wind.

It was a relief to be leaving there, Marcus thought. What had happened had been unfortunate, but in a way it had been for the best. The woman's frightening readiness to batten onto him, followed by her pathetic monologue and then the abrupt reversion to dangerous antagonism when the presence of the others had been made known had demonstrated her insta-

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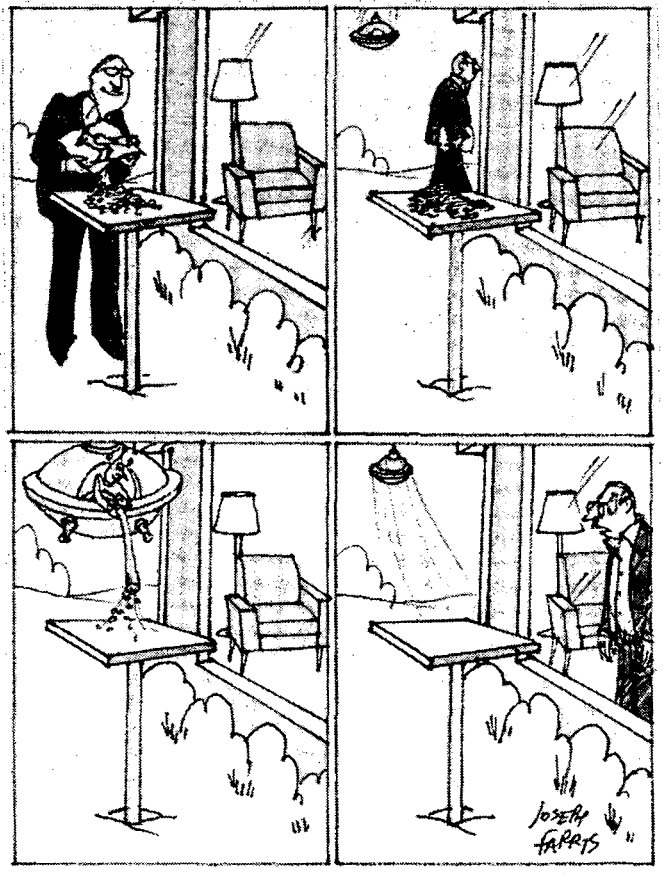
bility. Really, she was better off now, free of the ghosts that she endlessly mourned and no longer a threat to those like himself who had mercifully remained untouched by this appalling alternative to death.

And the truth, of course, was that she would never have fitted in; would always have been an unwanted intruder, a potentially destructive element that might ultimately have damaged the homogeneous balance of the group and the tolerable existence that they had created to insulate them from the ever-present nightmare.

He talked to Paul and Alan as he walked; a lone chattering figure, his solitary shadow darkening beside him as the sun rose and he began the climb that led out of the valley and toward the beckoning north.



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Installment 14: *In Which We Sail To The Edge Of The World And Confront The Abyss, Having Run Out Of Steam*

As fit subject matter for motion pictures, science fiction and fantasy are a pair of dead ducks. We have reached cul-de-sac and the curtain is about to be rung down. There has been a power failure in Metropolis; the Thing has been diced, sliced, riced in a trice and dumped into a pot of goulash; the Forbidden Planet has been subdivided for condos and a mini-mall; things to come has gone and went; and green cards have been denied Kharis, Münchausen, Gort and Lawrence Talbot.

What I'm telling you here is, they're dead, Jim, *dead*!

The trouble with this parrot is that this parrot is dead. I know a dead parrot when I see one, and I'm looking at one right now. It's stone dead. I took the liberty of examining this parrot and I discovered that the only reason it had been sitting on its perch in the first place was that it had been nailed there. And don't tell me that of course it was nailed there because if it hadn't been nailed it would have muscled up to the bars and *voom!* This parrot wouldn't *voom!* if you put four thousand volts through it. It's bleedin' demised. It's not pining for the fjords, it's passed on. This parrot is no more. It has ceased to be. It's expired, and gone to see its Mak-

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er. This is a late parrot. It's a stiff! Bereft of life, it rests in peace. If it hadn't been nailed to the perch it would be pushin' up the daisies. It's rung down the curtain and joined the Choir Invisible. This is an *ex*-parrot!

(And no, we haven't any gouda, muenster or red leicester.)

Man and boy, I've been looking at fantasy movies since 1940 when, at age six, I saw the first re-release of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* at the Utopia Theater in Painesville, Ohio; and I'm here to tell you that in a mere forty-five years the filmic genres of fantasy and science fiction have been wrung dry, have sprouted moss and ugly little white squiggly things, and are no more. Gone. Done. Finis. Kaput. As empty as a line of snappy dialogue emerging from Jennifer Beals's mouth.

This is one of those pronunciamentos one lives to regret at leisure. (My last one, "the mad dogs have kneed us in the groin," has hounded me, er, make that dogged my footsteps, uh, make that blighted my life . . . since my teens.) The sort of *I don't know fer sure, Gen'ral Custer, but they look friendly to me* one has thrown up to him ten years later, at the peak of a new golden age of cinema fantasy. Nonetheless, I have been going to the pictures a lot of late, and the scent of mold is in my nostrils. I have witnessed the best the film industry has had to offer from the well of sf/fantasy ideas, and I am here to tell you — despite the risks to my otherwise impeccable reputation — that if this is what passes for the best and brightest, then the end of the road is before us, and sf/fantasy has nothing more to offer.

All in the same month I have seen the latest variations on *Frankenstein, Dracula* and *The Wolf Man*, not to mention a lamebrain time travel picture that seems about to pass *Rambo: First Blood, Part Two* as the most popular flick of the summer. I speak of *Back to the Future*, of course. A film that has received almost unanimous salivations of delight from within and without the field. Kids love it, adults love it, sailors on leave off the *Aisukuriimu Maru* love it; intellectuals love it, horny-handed sons of toil love it, Manchester chimney sweeps love it; young women in their teens love it, grizzled pulp magazine sf writers love it, defecating Russian ballerinas love it. So what's *not* to love? I'll *tell* you what's not to love!

(Back to Frankie, Drac and Fangface in a moment, but permit me to savage the sf end of this argument first.)

Understand this:

Time is like a river flowing endlessly through the universe. Circa 500 B.C.: Heraclitus, the early Greek philosopher (there were no *late* Greek philosophers), lying around the agora like all the other unemployed philosophers, just idly thinking deep thoughts and providing a helipad for

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flies, said it for the first time, as best we know: Time is like a river, flowing endlessly through the universe.

And if you poled your flatboat in that river, you might fight your way against the current and travel upstream into the past. Or go with the flow and rush into the future.

This was in a less cynical time before toxic waste dumping and pollution filled the waterway of Chronus with the detritus of empty hours, wasted minutes, years of repetition and time that has been killed. But I digress.

Of all the pure fantasy plot devices, time travel is the second most prevalent in the genre of speculative fiction — right in there chugging along, trying harder because it's number two, close behind invasion-of-Earth-by-moist-things movies. (And make no mistake, it is *fantasy*, not science fiction. I don't want to argue about this. As that good and dear Isaac has told us: "Science fiction writers have dreamed of finding some device that would make travel along the temporal dimension to be as easily controlled as along any of the three spacial dimensions. First to do so was H.G. Wells in 1895 in his novel *The Time Machine*. Many (including myself) have used time machines since, but such a device is not practical and, as far as science now knows, will never be. Time travel, in the sense of moving freely backward and forward at will along the temporal dimension, is impossible.")

But as the ultimate literary device for a story of *what-if?*, time travel abounds in the genre of speculative fiction, notable in such works as Robert Heinlein's classic "By His Bootstraps," in which a man goes through a time portal again and again, meeting himself over and over (a story to be dramatized for the first time this year on the upcoming revival of *The Twilight Zone*); the late Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, in which Nazi Germany won WWII; *Pavane* by Keith Roberts, in which Queen Elizabeth I was assassinated and the Protestant Reformation was crushed, Mary Queen of Scots ascended the throne and the world became wholly Catholicized; and the late Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*, in which the South won the Civil War.

For shrugging off the toils of the here-and-now, for allowing human curiosity to fly unfettered, the *what-if?* theme cannot be bettered.

It is thus little wonder that the motion picture screen has returned to this plot-device with regularity, if not much depth of intellect.

There immediately spring to mind the most obvious films that have employed the time machine: *Somewhere in Time* (1980), based on a marvelous Richard Matheson novel called *Bid Time Return*, in which Christopher Reeve, using something like a Tantric trance, thinks himself into the past so he can woo and win Jane

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Seymour; *Time After Time* (1979) in which Malcolm McDowell as the young H.G. Wells pursues David Warner as Jack the Ripper from c. 1892 to San Francisco in the present day; the George Pal version of Wells's *The Time Machine* (1960) with Rod Taylor as the temporal traveler, finally linking up with Yvette Mimieux in the far future (as good a reason for going to the far future as one might wish); *Planet of the Apes* (1968) in which a contemporary space probe goes through some kind of timewarp in the outer reaches and returns to a far-future Earth now ruled by simians; *Time Bandits* (1981), in which a little boy abets a group of time-traveling dwarves as they rampage from era to era plundering and screwing up The Natural Order of things; *Slaughterhouse Five* (1972) in which Billy Pilgrim becomes "unstuck in time"; and 1984's *The Terminator* (some say based on writings we will not name here), in which an android assassin from the future is chased back through time to our day by a soldier determined to keep him from slaying a woman whose death would detrimentally affect the world of tomorrow.

But that's only the first calibration on the cinematic chrono-dial. How many filmgoers realized they were seeing a time-travel fantasy when they watched Bing Crosby as *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1949)? (Actually, Rhonda Fleming ain't a bad reason to travel back to yore, either.) How about *Brigadoon* (1954) or *Berkeley Square* (1933) with Leslie Howard? *It Happened Tomorrow* (1944) in which the device is the next day's newspaper that falls into Dick Powell's hands; the classic *Portrait of Jenny* (1948) from the famous Robert Nathan novel; and even *A Christmas Carol*, in its many incarnations, has strong time travel elements when Scrooge is taken by the ghosts to see his past and future; all are examples of the ineluctable hold the concept has on the creative intellect and on the curiosity of typical filmgoers.

Why should this be so? Well, consider the following:

If time is like a river that flows endlessly through the universe, then might it not be possible that by going into the past and altering some pivotal moment in history, the river's course could be changed? By damming the past at some seminal nexus, could we not alter our world today?

Say, for instance, you stepped into your time machine today and stepped out in 1963, in the Texas Book Depository, behind Lee Harvey Oswald as he was drawing a bead on JFK, and you yelled, "Hey, you asshole!" might it not startle him for that precious moment during which Kennedy would get out of the target area, and history be forever altered?

What if you were on-site during one of the nexus moments of ancient history; during those months in 218

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B.C. in which Hannibal crossed the Italian Alps with his elephants to attack Imperial Rome? And what if you set loose on the mountain a rabbit that dislodged a pebble, that hit a stone, that rolled into a larger stone, that broke loose a rock, that hit a boulder, that started an avalanche, that closed the mountain pass? The flow of Western Civilization would have been utterly diverted.

With such Wells of invention inherent in even the shallowest of time travel stories, with such fecundity of imagination born into the basic concept, it would seem impossible for a filmmaker ladling up riches from that genre to produce a movie anything less than fascinating. Not even forty-five years should run it dry, right? If one thinks so, one has not seen BACK TO THE FUTURE (Universal), a celluloid thing as trivial as a Twinkie and, like much of the recent Steven Spielberg-presented product, equally as saccharine.

Directed by Robert Zemeckis, currently a "hot talent" by dint of having trivialized both romance and high adventure with last year's *Romancing the Stone*, this flapdoodle from Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment uses a plutonium-powered DeLorean to send 17-year-old Michael J. Fox back to 1955 so he can set up the meeting between his mother and father (as high schoolers), thus securing his own future birth. Naturally, his mother gets the hots for him, and the lofty time paradox possibilities are reduced to the imbecile level of sitcom.

With the arrogance of what the great French director Alain Resnais has called "the wise guy *auteurs*," Zemeckis and co-producer Bob Gale have had the effrontery to write a time travel screenplay with seemingly no knowledge of the vast body of such literature. And the story is by turns cheaply theatric, coincidental, obvious and moronic. Not to mention that Robert A. Heinlein and his attorneys are rumored to be murmuring the word *plagiarism* because of the film's freightload of similarities to *Time Enough for Love*, the master's 1973 time travel novel, as well as the famous Heinlein short story "—All You Zombies."

Yet even with such embarrassing trivializations of a concept that seems dolt-proof, if — as Bogdanovich suggests — movies are merely pieces of time, then surely this idiom as a source for fresh and imaginative films has barely been tapped.

At least one would think so.

Yet here it is, less than sixty years since filmmakers denied the wonders of modern technology, computer graphics, robotics and even the freedom of using models made of plastic or hydrocal, not to mention color or sound, drawing merely from the treasurehouse of imagination, were able to create *Metropolis*; and their artistic descendants can offer us nothing more meaningful or inventive than

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Back to the Future.

If we date the "beginning" of cinematography from Edison's Kinetoscope in 1891 — rather than from Roget's Theory of the Persistence of Vision in 1824, or Rudge's 1875 magic lantern projector, or from Muybridge, or from Jules Etienne Marey — then we are talking about a self-proclaimed "art form" whose age is less than a hundred years. Yet if we are to judge by the trite product that the most advanced crafts and talents offer us — the endless sequels, endless remakes, endless *"hommages"* that are little better then inept plagiarism — this is an "art form" that has already gone stagnant, if not wholly, then damned certainly insofar as sf/fantasy is concerned.

I think I've reached the core of my thesis.

If we date the age of modern science fiction from Wells, rather than from Verne or Mary Shelley or Lucian of Samosata or the nameless author of the Gilgamesh Epic, we have a second art form whose age is less than a century. (I'll let adherents of the Verne-vesus-Wells school hammer out the rationales for my picking Herbert George over Jules. I don't mean to be either capricious or arbitrary; I merely feel that *modern* sf as we know it, for purposes of this discussion, is better defined as proceeding from Wells's more thoughtful dystopian view of technology's effects on people than from Verne's less-critical utopian fascination with things mechanical.)

Proceeding thus: speculative fiction as a coherent genre is a medium as old as cinema, and the two have been inextricably linked from the outset. Hell, the first movie of them all, according to many experts, was a science fantasy: Georges Méliès's *Le Voyage Dans La Lune*, 1902. But in less than a hundred years, sf in the print medium has come from the naïveté of Verne, the didacticism of Chesney, and the technocracy of Hugo Gernsback to a sophistication that produces writers as various as Lafferty (our answer to Thurber), Gene Wolfe (as one with Bierce), Kate Wilhelm (Dostoevskian), Benford (Faulknerian), Le Guin (equal to C.S. Lewis), Silverberg (Dickensian), Ballard (Joycean), John Crowley (whose resonances are with Colette) and Moorcock (in the tradition of Fielding) . . . while filmed sf gives us vapid and grotesque, unnecessary remakes of *Invaders from Mars, The Thing, Cat People* and *King Kong*. Even as the newer writers — Butler, Kim Stanley Robinson, Shepard, Bishop, Connie Willis, Tem, Curval, Bryant and Simmons — assimilate all that was the best of "the New Wave" of the Sixties/Seventies, melding it with elements of traditional sf, to develop ever subtler and more innovative ways of dealing with *what-if*, the cutting edge of sf in film is *Explorers, Cocoon, Baby, Weird Science* and *Back to the Future.*

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Even extolling the virtues of *Cocoon* and *Weird Science*, the reality with which we must deal is that sf cinema has come, in a few years (comparatively speaking, as regards the life-span of an art form), to a weary recycling of the same tired themes with mere fillips of variation, cosmetic repaintings of last year's models. In any other art form, such a manifestation of aridity of invention, such an abvious stasis, would signal the end of development. In just this way did the epic poem give way to the novel form.

A moment's pause. How is it that written sf, for all its wrong turns, faddish detours and periodic recidivism, has continued to show constant growth and revitalization, while film — with its mushrooming population growth of new, young talents and astonishing technical expertise — has turned more and more in on itself, cannibalizing the core subject matter and paying false homage to its most trendy newcomers, even as it ignores the experimental work of men and women whose vision opened new paths fifty years ago? Gil Lamont suggests, and I agree, that sf in the print medium continues to show vitality, in defiance of the natural order of such things, precisely because it *is* a ghetto. Since we need not please the masses, the Great Wad, as do television and big-budget films, we continue to produce that which interests *us*. And the *us* that is pleased is one raised on The Word. Not an *us*, like those who come to work in tv and movies, raised on thirty-five years of repetitive sitcoms and episodic series.

Only mass-market sf — "sci-fi" — gives us repackagings of the same old themes: space opera, heroic fantasy, things with fangs, haunted houses. Here in this ghetto, for all its death of soul for writers who aspire to the larger playing fields of general literature, there is a welcoming of the daring and experimental. So the best we have to offer, even thirty years old, is ignored by the motion picture mentality in favor of hackneyed treatments of hoary cliches. ***Starman, Ice Pirates, The Last Starfighter*** and ***Back to the Future*** are prime, current examples.

It is clear: those who pass themselves off as creative intellects — Joe Dante, Spielberg, Lucas, Landis, Carpenter, among many whose names fall from the lips unbidden — are truncated things, capable of limited imagination. Oh, their technical flourishes are beyond cavil. They know every new camera lens and stop-action technique. But what they choose to put up on the screen is empty. It is either devoid of intellectual content or so sunk in adolescence that it can appeal to none but the most easily dazzled. Now we get an ***hommage, en passant,*** in ***Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*** to a line from ***Bucka roo Banzai; Explorers*** tips its dunce cap to ***Gremlins***; and Steven Spielberg is on record as having said of

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Back to the Future, "It's the greatest 'Leave It To Beaver' episode ever produced."

Isn't that a daring project for the most powerful and artistically unfettered talent in film today!

You'll notice I'm not even attacking these films on their lack of internal logic or extrapolative rationality. This note of the death-knell strikes simply in terms of which stories have been chosen for the telling.

Which brings me to THE BRIDE (Columbia), TEEN WOLF (Atlantic Distributing) and FRIGHT NIGHT (Columbia).

All three have been popular. *Teen Wolf*, a quickie, has a mass appeal based, apparently, solely on the current hot actor status of tv's Michael J. Fox. The other two did well at the boxoffice, it seems, because of subject matter. And what *is* the subject matter? Is it something fresh and new in the canon of fantasy? Is the subject matter sophisticated and newly-slanted as was the case with *Liquid Sky, Repo Man* and *Night of the Comet*, three innovative films that died at the boxoffice, and have become cult favorites precisely because they *are* purely ghetto films that eschew all the Amblinlike appurtenances of moron media hype? Are they even as fresh as, say, 1940s sf films?

No, they are minuscule variations on *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*.

All on the same month, rechewings of the three classic film fantasy archetypes.

Teen Wolf is easy to dismiss. Badly directed, sloppily written, riddled with holes in the storyline logic, all this exploitation hackwork has to recommend it is the kid, Michael J. Fox; and as best I can tell he's got a one-note style of acting developed for NBC's *Family Ties* that is pleasant enough at first encounter, but is already wearing thin in these eyes.

Fright Night is also easy to dispense with. The vampire is charming, the vampire lives next door, the vampire dies in the latest hi-tech manner. That's it. Vivid violence, some sophomoric humor, teenaged protagonists and Roddy McDowell doing his prissy imitation of Vincent Price as a ghoul-show host. That's it. Chris Sarandon — whom you may remember as Al Pacino's gay lover in *Dog Day Afternoon* — plays the bloodsucker in the currently hip Frank Langella/David Bowie/David Niven/George Hamilton charm-the-knickers-off-them manner, intended (one presumes) to set labia lubricating. The specter of Lugosi need have no fears. Sarandon's vampire isn't worthy of whisking the dandruff from Bela's cape. There is more of reminiscence of the young Robert Stack bounding into frame with a grin and a "Tennis, anyone?" than of Carpathian Creepiness.

Tom Holland, who wrote and directed *Fright Night*, is remembered fondly for *Cloak and Dagger, Psycho II* and *The Beast Within*, a trio of

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humdingers. Stop gnashing your teeth, it's not polite!

The Bride is a little harder to slough off. Principally because it was obviously made with serious intent, considerable intelligence insofar as design is concerned, and a performance by David Rappaport (the leader of the *Time Bandits* dwarves, Randall) that is no less than stunning. The conceit that motivated this film's production was the *what-if?* that follows a created female by Dr. Von Frankenstein that did *not* perish immediately. Not a bad idea. Room for a whole lot of development there. And for the first half hour one is so taken with the look and pace of the film, that it only slowly dawns — through the numbness in your butt — that there isn't much going on up there. At final resolve, the film turns out to be an elegant, handsomely-mounted bore. And Jennifer Beals, essaying the role created by Elsa Lanchester, is simply embarrassing. One expects her to fling free the coils that suspend her in the web of lightning, and flashdance her way into Sting and Quentin Crisp's hearts.

As pretty to look at as *Barry Lyndon* or *Tess*, but no more enriching than *Teen Wolf* or *Back to the Future* or *Fright Night, The Bride* forms the fourth wall of the box into which cinematic sf/fantasy has chivvied itself.

Once one has seen the original Tod Browning-directed version of *Dracula* (1931) with Lugosi unparalleled for interpretation of the dreaded Count, and once one has seen the 1979 *Love at First Bite* with George Hamilton, Arte Johnson, Susan St. James, Richard Benjamin and Dick Shawn flailing away at every possible hilarious parody variation on the original canon . . . what is there of significance left to do with the vampire idea?

Once one has seen James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), with Karloff unparalleled for interpretation of the Monster, and once one has seen Mel Brooks's 1974 *Young Frankenstein* doing for that classic what *Love at First Bite* did for *Dracula* . . . why do we need yet another remastication of the original meal?

As for *Teen Wolf* or *An American Werewolf in London* or *The Howling* (not to mention Michael Jackson's *Thriller*), if you can't live up to the tragedy and pathos of Lawrence Talbot being clubbed to death by Claude Rains, if you can't get Madame Maria Ouspenskaya to play the gypsy woman Maleva, and if you can't express the horror of lycanthropy without the special effects folks laying in barrels of gore, then why not think of something new? I mean, hell, John Carpenter thought of a new monster creation for *The Thing* remake: killer Italian food.

These four films, the cutting edge of what is being done *today* in sf/fantasy on the screen, say more about

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the sere and dusty condition of imaginations brought to bear on the genre. This, sadly, is the best they can do.

It's not that there isn't room for better. Go see KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN (Island Alive productions), an astonishing fantasy based on Manuel Puig's extraordinary novel, starring William Hurt, Raul Julia and Sonia Braga. Very likely one of the most important films of the past decade. And see what the *real* talent has to offer these days. Do not go gentle into that good night of movie attendance believing that *Explorers* or *The Goonies* or *Back to the Future* proffer anything more meaningful than background to chew your Jujubes by.

Here are four moneymaking films, top of the rank, best by far, lauded and applauded by the Wad. And they ask for nothing finer, nothing richer. And it's not that the *auteurs* set out to make empty, useless films: *this is the best they can do!*

With greater freedom, superlative technology, exchequer-breaking budgets, neither Spielberg nor Lucas, nor any of the clone-children they have taken under their wings, from Arkush to Zemeckis, can match by one-millionth the achievements of Willis O'Brien, Val Lewton, James Whale or Fritz Lang. They preen and posture and talk about technique in the short takes one sees on the cable movie channels, but in truth they are the whistling pallbearers of the corpse of cinematic fantasy.

The art form has reached its untimely end. All is ashes and *Porky's* from this time forward.

How tragic that many of you will have attended the wake and never know that the eyes staring back at you are those of the living dead.

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Harvey Jacobs' new story concerns the search for the heir to the Holy Lama Shi Shu Sha, and one thrilling hour in the life of Henry, Ellen and Seymour Sritz of West Stockton.

Seymourlama

BY
HARVEY JACOBS

In the clutch of a brutal winter, while Halley's comet creased a sky the color of blue ice, the town of West Stockton huddled into its skin. The holidays had passed. There were still a few wreaths tacked to doors. The local bar had a string of colored lights dangling in a frosted window. But there was no more sense of celebration.

Hope was snowbound. The people were pale. They saw the faces of dead relatives in the exhaust swirls from their cars. Icicles were frozen bones. Lives were cubed, frozen in glossy limbo. Nobody spoke of spring. Bills came in the mail. Brief memories of Christmas pleasure were transformed into numbers printed by a computer. The cold browsed bodies and houses looking for cracks and crevices. The invasion of the town was complete.

Considering, the home of Henry and Ellen Sritz was comfortable. New Thermopane windows, a repaired boiler, and a small fireplace kept the temperature constant. One evening after a nice dinner of chicken, broccoli, baked potatoes, applesauce, and green salad, Henry Sritz got up to walk the dog. He remembered that the dog had died six months before.

"You got up to walk the dog, didn't you?" said Ellen Srtiz. "Don't deny it. I do that myself sometimes. We should get a new dog. I think Seymour needs a new dog.

"A new dog. Replace the dog. Dead dog, new dog. That's the way, I suppose."

Henry went to look at the frigid night. He wiped a space on the frosted window. A full moon rolled up past the border of evergreens that surrounded his property. It seemed

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to be boiling. Thin white clouds blew past the moon like puffs of steam. The moon's surface rippled like water in a pot. That afternoon, a sun the color of a stale wafer had hung icebound over the town, and now the moon was boiling.

Ellen was reading *Vanity Fair*, looking at a picture of Acapulco. It was a delicious photograph filled with lovely people playing on a beach. In the warm water, swimmers jumped for a rainbow-colored beach ball. Far from the beach a girl flew strapped to a huge orange kite attached to a white boat that cut the waves. But even that picture did not remind Ellen of spring. It just seemed like another world, far off and unaffordable.

Seymour Sritz came down from upstairs, went into the kitchen, came out holding a piece of jellied white bread and a can of Coke. He went over to the television set and turned it on. A black car alive with computers and digital screens was talking to its driver about Russian conspirators.

"What in hell do you think you're doing?" said Henry.

"'Knight Rider,'" Seymour said. "I'm watching 'Knight Rider.' I always watch 'Knight Rider.'"

"You might have asked before you came in and turned on that set," said Ellen. "That would have been nice."

"I always watch 'Knight Rider.'"

"What about your homework?"

"Mostly done. They didn't give much."

"They didn't give much. That's fine," Henry said. "Turn that thing down."

"It happens to be a very well done show. You might like it if you gave it a try."

"Thanks," Henry said. "Maybe you'll outgrow comic books one of these years."

"It's not a comic book. It's a Top Ten Show."

"Top Ten. Well."

"Just turn it down," Ellen said. "I'm trying to read." The sound from the television, which was now a commercial for cheese, destroyed the Acapulco scene. Everyone scattered from the golden beach, and the girl on the kite fell into the water. Ellen closed the magazine and looked over at a huge wedge of Cheddar. Henry blocked the sound with his eyes. He focused totally on the moon's globe. He knew Seymour had not done his homework. He knew that in a few weeks they would get a call from some teacher or other telling them about incompletes . . . themes, compositions, pages of math. But he wasn't in the mood to do battle with his son. He felt drained by the season. His sinuses were dry from hot air pumped up through metal ducts.

"Do you want some tea or coffee?"

"No," Henry said. "Thanks, no."

"Tea with milk," Seymour said. "Two spoons."

"Too much sugar," Ellen said. "Your face is breaking out again."

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"That has nothing to do with sugar," Seymour said. The magical car was chasing another car down a concrete highway. When a truck blocked the way, the car went into superturbo and lifted up and over the obstacle. Nothing could stop that car. Seymour felt its fabulous power. It would be marvelous to be able to touch a button and soar. Put them all away. "Sugar doesn't turn to zits. It was on the news. You like the news."

"I don't care what was on the news," Ellen said. "I know what I know."

"Give him the sugar," Henry said. "Let him be a pimple farm."

"Forget the tea," Seymour said. "Just forget it."

Ellen went to make the tea. Seymour turned up the set so he could hear the car motor purr. Henry's eyes came down from the giant moon. He thought he saw figures moving through the snow, hunched shapes coming slowly toward the house. He looked hard. There was something out there. Deer probably. The herd had exploded since hunting was banned in the county. The idea of desperate animals foraging in that cold was depressing. If the dog were alive, it would be barking. The shapes would turn and run. They came closer and closer.

"Did you see that?" Seymour said to himself. "My God. These stuntmen are incredible. Awesome."

Henry wiped more of the window clear. The outer glass of the Thermopane was badly misted. But now he could see that the approaching shapes were human.

"Somebody is out there," he said.

"What?" Seymour said. "Where?"

"Out there. In the snow."

"That's impossible."

"We're going to have visitors."

"Who?"

"How should I know? The 'Brady Bunch'."

"That hasn't been on for a hundred years."

"If it were, you'd watch it. They're coming to the front door."

"Who's coming to the front door?" Ellen said. She handed Seymour a cup of tea and put her own on an end table.

"I don't recognize any of them. Three men, I think. It's hard to tell."

"If you don't know them, don't open."

"I can't leave them standing out in the wind. Maybe their car broke down."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Don't open. Tell them you'll call the police to help them. And if they say they want to use the telephone, tell them it's out of order."

"Tell who?" Seymour said.

"The men out there. If they are men. I can't even see their faces. They're bundled up."

"No wonder. Just don't open until you know exactly what you're dealing with."

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"Let me see," Seymour said. "Where?"

"Right out there."

"We should have a gun. Everybody else has a gun."

"Calm down," Henry said. "This isn't the jungle yet."

"Tell me you don't wish you had a gun, even a .22 rifle."

"Ellen, maybe you'd better wait upstairs."

"Nonsense. This is my home."

"Tell them that if they begin to fold, spindle, and mutilate," Seymour said.

There was a soft knocking at the door. Ellen thought of going upstairs but held her ground. Seymour looked over at the television screen. His show was ending, he had missed the final scene. Henry balanced simple decency with a lick of fear. Crime was a reality, and rural crime on the increase. They drove up from the city to ravage. Still, a knock on the door at night in dead winter. You could freeze to death out there. There was another knock: louder, harder.

Henry went up to the door shouted, "Who is it?" The only reply was an insistent tapping. "Who's out there?"

"Please open," said a thin voice. "Please open."

Seymour shrugged. Ellen nodded "no". Henry, who hated severe cold burning at his lips and lungs, turned the knob. He saw three robed figures waiting. When the light hit them, they actually sparkled. Bits of snow and ice reflected the glow and lit them like store window displays. The tallest, a bearded young man, said, "Thank you. May we come in?"

"If you're selling something, we're not in the market just now." Henry said, knowing it was a ridiculous remark. What salesman would be out in a subzero night? At that hour? "Come in," he said. "Please wipe your boots. The carpet. . . ."

"Yes, of course," said the tall man. "The carpet."

The three visitors began pounding their feet on the small step outside the Sritzes' door. A cloud of snow rose from thick fur boots. Henry had never seen boots like that. They could have been the legs of mammoths. Leather thongs laced up their tops and tied into heavy knots.

When the tall man stopped slapping his feet against the step, the others stopped, too. Henry nodded in response to a stare from the obvious leader. They entered in parade, then stood clumped in the living room. Together, the mass of them reminded Henry of pictures he had seen in the *National Geographic* of strange habitations made of skins, wood, mud and rock. Not houses, not tents, but a hodgepodge of random gatherings and steamy leftovers from a hunt. Two were men, the third seemed to be a woman. It was hard to tell under those layers of clothing, fleece jackets, pants made of something like tar paper, fur boots, great odiferous capes

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lifted off the backs of oxen, with hoods like band shells.

"Well," Ellen said, "we were just enjoying a cup of tea. Would you care . . . . ?"

"Nothing, thank you," said the leader. "We realize this is an imposition. Please don't feel obligated to provide any refreshments."

"At least take your coats off," Henry said. That had to be said, though Henry had the feeling that taking off those garments would account for at least an hour's work. Seymour watched pools drip from the robes. He knew his mother was trying to contain herself. The carpet was her own skin. Ellen kept quiet. She looked for signs of glinting steel. These intruders probably carried knives.

The one Henry took to be a woman began chanting. Her voice rose in a majestic wail that snapped like a whip. The second man, a short, round, older man with a Mongol face, smiled and giggled. The leader examined Seymour as if he were a new life-form.

"This is the child, then?"

"I am sorry," Henry said. "I am Henry Sritz. This is my wife, Ellen. And, yes, our only child, Seymour Sritz."

"I am Chi Fun. This is Li Dik. And there is Madam Wu. We are all individually most pleased to make your acquaintance. Of the delegation, only I speak English."

Madam Wu increased the level of her chanting. She began to wring her gloved hands. Li Dik bowed and smiled again. Chi Fun held out his hand, and Henry grabbed it and pumped.

"This is some kind of gag, right?" Seymour said. "Come on, what is it all about? 'Bloopers and Practical Jokes'?"

"Forgive Seymour," Henry said. "He thinks everything is related to the media."

"Is that person all right?" Ellen said. Madam Wu was on her knees kissing the floor.

"Yes, fine. She's excited, though. We have traveled a very long way. And the Holiday Inn was so warm we had to sleep with our windows wide open. The problem there was that the windows don't open." Chi Fun laughed. Li Dik laughed, too. Henry, Ellen, and Seymour smiled. "They put us in the basement."

"So you're staying at the Holiday Inn," Henry said. "Nice enough place for a town this size."

"Excellent," said Chi Fun. "Food was something of a problem, though. I had never before seen a shrimp cocktail."

"Yes, well," Henry said.

"You want to know why we are here? Is this the time to talk frankly? Have we engaged in sufficient amenities?"

"Sufficient, certainly."

"We want the child," said Chi Fun. Madam Wu arose from the floor and threw her arms around Seymour.

"You want what?" said Ellen.

Madam Wu pulled at her robe,

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then at her vest, and there was the sound of fabric ripping. A splendid breast was released, crowned by a rigid nipple. She grabbed Seymour's head and pulled it toward the breast while making a gurgling noise. Seymour's face vanished inside Madam Wu's rent clothing along with the full, fine breast.

"She is very emotional," said Chi Fun. Li Dik shook his head back and forth, then up and down. "We all are. This is a fantastic moment, as you must understand."

"She'll smother him," Ellen said.

"Yes. Mother him."

"*Smother.* He needs air."

Seymour's arms wriggled, then fell at his side. Henry saw that his son seemed peaceful enough.

"Can you expand on your statement about wanting the child?" Henry said.

"Forgive me. I thought our actions were self-evident. I keep forgetting that we do not share a common culture."

"Sy?" Ellen said. "Are you all right?"

"Could you clarify your intent?" Henry said.

"As you must know, the Holy Lama Shi Shu Sha passed on a month ago. In his ninety-eighth year."

"I must have read it somewhere."

"Immediately upon the flight of his blessed soul, our monks and wisemen looked for signs. It was vital that his chosen heir be found quickly. For religious, practical, and political reasons."

"I concede that. I gather there is no vice lama to step into the job."

Madam Wu fell over on her back, dragging Seymour down with her. She was singing what seemed to be a popular song, making a joyful noise.

"That's very distracting," Ellen said.

"We read the stars, the omens, the birds, insect behavior, the flow of clouds, and, of course, the ancient books. And the configuration of the mountains, which changes with each temblor, seismic shock, or actual quake. The beaks of plumed pigeons were divided by the contractual angles of sun shafts reflecting off our small pyramid. It's not Cheops, but it is ours. And crystals deflected shadows of migratory beasts. Taken together, to make a long story short, an heir was found. Your son."

"Seymour? The heir to Shi Shu Sha? I've got to laugh," Henry said.

"Please don't laugh, or we will be forced to eviscerate you."

"Is that a threat?"

"Oh, no. Merely an obligation. Now, we brought you some gifts."

"What gifts?" Ellen said.

Seymour pulled his head away from the surging breast of Madam Wu. "What time is it?" he said. "I'm missing 'Dynasty'" He rushed to the television set.

"Keep it low," Henry said. "We're talking here."

Chi Fun gestured widely to Li Dik, who produced three sacks and two

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wooden boxes from inside his robe. He pulled a drawstring on the first sack and spilled a pile of brownish grains onto the coffee table.

"From the first crop of barley following the lama's departure. It is, according to our legends, very potent, very lucky. The little parchment you see in the sack contains clever recipes."

"Thank you," Ellen said. "I appreciate that."

Li Dik opened the second sack. It was empty. But he turned the sack, squeezed it, and waved it in the air.

"There's nothing in there," Henry said.

"Wrong," said Chi Fun. "The lama's last breath was in there and is now in here. I don't think you fully realize the import. In our country, your home would have increased measurably in value. Say, 10,000 percent."

"We thank you. The thought is the important thing."

The third sack held little marbles that proved to be yak droppings. Li Dik scattered them around the living room.

"Those yaks grazed on the Mountain of Insight and Celestial Transformation. Their emanations are of urgent interest."

"What's in the boxes?" Henry said.

"The boxes? Only jewels."

Li Dik opened the two boxes. They were filled to brimming with emeralds, sapphires, amethysts, pearls white and black, rubies, and large diamonds.

"That's very impressive," Henry said.

"Just a token of things to come. We really put on the dog at the coronation. Of course, you'll come. We have first-class tickets on TWA, and the frequent-flyer credits will remain in your name. That's a lot of mileage."

"And you seriously believe that we will give up our only son, Seymour, for some beads and a few airline tickets?"

"Consider his welfare, Mr. Sritz. Your Seymour will be accepted as our supreme leader. He will live in a palace with a marvelous view of Everest. His every need will be gratified. His every word will be inscribed. The alternative is a liberal arts education and possibly a position with IBM or Apple or Digital Equipment. And as his parents, Henry, Ellen, you will always be welcomed as the cosmic agents who brought Seymour to us. I'm talking reverence here. I'm talking Executive Producers, prime time, to use a metaphor."

"What about reception?" Ellen said. "One thing you can't offer Seymour is cable."

"A lsatellite dish, though, and a VCR."

"I assume Seymour would be expected to marry one of your people,"

"Marry? Never. But his choice of women, girls, anything that moves. And his offspring, your grandchildren, will be brought up in a royal fashion."

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"I heard that," Seymour said. He left Madam Wu watching a L'eggs commercial and came to join the conversation. "What about music? Is it all the ethnic stuff that lady sings?"

"The best groups come to visit us," Chi Fun said. Our whole country is nothing but acoustics. And the palace is Bang and Olafson. Wired top to bottom. Yes, you'd have to learn a few chants and anthems, but what you hear in the privacy of your Walkman, so to speak, is entirely your affair. You work only four times a year during major ceremonies. The rest is California dreaming."

"My every word is your command, right?"

"Exactly."

"I could tell you to suck grasshoppers or whatever, and you do it, right?"

"With pleasure and honor."

"I like it."

"Maybe when you finish high-school," Ellen said.

"Is all this written down in black and white?" Henry said.

"No. Not in black and white. In gold. On platinum."

Li Dik reached inside his robe and produced a scroll. It was delicately hand-lettered with swirling letters. Drawings of dragons, lions, elephants, and dancing girls decorated the sides.

"I'd have to show that to my lawyer," Henry said.

"No problem. But we must take Seymour before the moon changes phase."

"I don't know if I can get hold of my lawyer before the moon changes phase."

"For this?" Ellen said. "Of course you can. He's my first cousin."

"What about some kind of crown?" Seymour said.

Chi Fun waved to Li Dik, who beamed and held out an oval of jade. Seymour put it on and went to look in the mirror.

"I don't want him spoiled," Ellen said. "Remember Elvis. Too much, too soon."

"He's a bright kid," Henry said. "He's got values. They'll see him through."

"It fits," Seymour said. "Like a screw top. Like I was made for it."

"Do we have an understanding, then?" said Chi Fun.

"I guess we do. Yes. Why not."

"Then I must use your phone for a collect call. There will be rejoicing."

"A collect call," Ellen said. "The phone is over there, next to the sofa."

Chi Fun bowed and picked up the receiver. "Since the divestiture of AT&T, one never can be sure," he said. "Hello? Operator? Yes, I wish to call long-distance. Very long distance. A bit of humor. The area code is four digits. 8000-333-9999. With a 1 — as you know, this being your profession. The call is to be collect, person-to-person, to Cha Kip Mo. C-H-A-K-I-P-M-O. Yes. My name is Chi Fun. C-H-I . . . Fun as in fun. Yes. I'm calling from area code 914-999-2122. The phone

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is in the name of Mr. Henry Sritz. The address is 73 Mapletop Lane."

"74 Mapletop Lane," said Seymour.

"Pardon?" said Chi Fun.

"74 Mapletop Lane."

"Operator, please ignore this call," he said and hung up. "Are you sure this is 74 Mapletop Lane?"

"Roll over," Seymour said. "Am I sure? You dare ask?"

Chi Fun said something to Li Dik and Madam Wu. He said it again. Tears poured from their eyes.

"I'm very sorry," said Chi Fun. "But we have made a nasty error. You see, we were looking for 73 Mapletop Lane."

"The Schwartzes? You can't mean it," Ellen said.

But I do mean it most emphatically."

"What would you want with the Schwartzes? Not their kid. Never in a million years," Henry said.

"Joe Schwartz is a wimp," Seymour said. "His head is half the size of mine. The crown would fall down around his genitals."

"You'd better recheck your pigeon beaks and angles," Henry said. "Better do whatever you have to do before you screw up your country's history."

"An omen is an omen," said Chi Fun. "We'll need the hat back. Seymour. And the jewels. You can keep the barley, the breath, and the yak droppings."

"When you see the Schwartz kid, you'll come running back here. And then we'll talk contract."

"Mr. Sritz, what can I tell you? It's such a lousy night. We made a wrong turn. How exactly does one get to the house of the Schwartzes?"

"You make a left at the gate, keep walking until you see a mailbox shaped like a kind of hippopotamus. It's cute. You can't miss it. The box says Schwartz on it."

"Thank you, Mrs. Sritz, Mr. Sritz. Seymour."

"Up yours," Seymour said.

The three visitors departed quickly, after gathering up the crown and the two boxes.

"You didn't have to say *up yours,*" said Ellen. "You could have displayed dignity in the circumstances."

"Come on, Ma," Seymour said. "I mean, come off it. They had me excited."

"God, can you see the Schwartzes all decked out at the coronation with Joe Schwartz standing there with a crown around his behind?" Henry said.

The Sritzes laughed.

"I wish the dog were alive to see all this," Henry said.

"My tea is stone-cold," Ellen said. "And look at the carpet. Just look at it."

"If you had kept your mouth shut when he said 73 Mapletop Lane, the operator would never have noticed," Henry said.

"It was a reflex," Seymour said. "I

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didn't know what I was doing. All those promises of glory, and after what that lady did to me. I nearly drownded."

"*Drowned.* Not drownded. If you read more, you would know how to speak."

Henry Sritz went to the window again. He saw the three figures trudging toward the Schwartz house. There would be no living with the Schwartzes. Not after tonight.

"Count your blessings," Ellen said, coming up beside him. "Easy come, easy go."

"Damn," said Henry. "You know the odds against anybody else picking Seymour for that kind of job?"

"Somebody wins every contest," Ellen said.

"Ellen, you have an earthy wisdom that gets me through. I tend to lose perspective, especially in winter."

"The Schwartz kid is sickly. He wheezes," Ellen said.

"I know," Henry said.

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"'A Creature of Water,'" writes Richard Mueller, "is a story about loss and its impact upon the creative process. A year previously I had lost the love of a woman who meant everything to me. The long trek between love and friendship had not been easy, but I'd been helped along the way by my friends . . . You can't pay someone back for saving your life, but you can try to pass on the message: that no matter what happens you go on and do and give your best."

A Creature of Water

BY
RICHARD MUELLER

McAllister made a final adjustment on the yoke to accommodate Adler's jug-handle ears and slipped the entire construct over his head.

"Now hold still."

I know, Adler thought, and he knows I know. I know; you know; he, she, or it knows. The beast gave off a slight rumble that vibrated gently through the foam earpieces. The sharp snap of switches being engaged came dimly through the intervening machine, as metallic sounds drifting up from a depth of water. Adler took a breath and held it as the penetrating tubes entered his nostrils and ear canals. We know, you know, they know. The cold, flat disk pressed his forehead. "Now."

Yeah, now. The first subtone came softly through his fluid skull, searching the water for an echo. Map me. Map the bottom of my silver sea.

• • •

He became conscious of movement. The tubes were withdrawing. McAllister's voice.

"Yellow. Yellow One. Yellow Four. Red Ten. Red. Red. Yellow." The encircling apparatus swung away as Adler heard the doctor sigh. He shook his head to clear it.

"Don't shake your head."

"How do you know that I am? You've got your head buried in that machine."

"I know you. You always shake your head. Let the fluid drain naturally."

He put his head back against the leatherette V, feeling the oil drip from his earlobes. It would bring tiny spatters on the protective plastic cape, sounds too subtle to carry through the wet, sounds too soft for his diminished hearing.

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"So tell me," he said at last, when McAllister had been too long silent. Am I worse?"

Listen to it run, listen to the last
As your future slips into your past
As the sands pour out
The waters steam away
Bring dusk to your day, dusk to your day
And soon, so soon, oh man
Return to clay.

The skimmer peeled out of the traffic stream, shot downward on Terminal Approach, and slipped neatly into its socket — a modular nipple in the rambling Hollywood Hills econdo that Walter Adler called home. The hemis on the nipple snapped shut and the interior lights came on as the skimmer lowered into its cradle. The benefits of moderate fame, Adler thought sardonically as the rocker came to rest. Silently. I used to be able to hear that, he thought. He unclenched his hands and swung himself out.

Candy was waiting for him on the deck, a drink on the sidebar, looking beautiful, composed. Smiling. He, she, it knows. The youngest of three sisters — Candy a nickname. He'd never called her anything else. The other two sisters were Cookie and Peaches — an obvious archaic streak in the family — and never spoke to the black sheep who had married a songwriter. Candy scarcely missed them, and Walter had never met the eldest. One encounter with Cookie had been enough. Walter had no living family, and if he was enough for Candy, Candy was certainly enough for him.

She had the drink in her hand before he could speak, and held it out to him.

"Hi, Idol of Millions."

"You're deluded, and I love it." He put his arms around her, and there could be no doubt. If she had not known, she did now. She walked him to the couch, and they sat, faces to the dying sun, its glory reflected in the Pacific, on the silver and steel bubbles of Los Angeles. He postponed the moment for as long as possible, feeling her beneath his arm, until it was time. Until he had to speak.

"I saw McAllister today."

She looked up at him, waiting.

"He's certain. Its Decomp."

She buried her head on his chest. They both knew what it meant. Since the first onset of symptoms, six months previously, they had suspected, investigated, hoped against hope. His hearing was down about 10 percent. A peculiar oily feeling in his ears. A bitterness in his mouth that came and went. McAllister had made all the necessary tests, checking and counterchecking, eliminating all possible rivals for the cause, as his auditory perception gently edged away, checking long after any other doctor would have sadly diagnosed the alien strain. But McAllister had held out

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the hope, no matter how slight, that it might be something else. Something less serious. Something temporary.

"How long?" she said tensely. Deliberately, he raised her head to his and kissed her.

"From here on I should lose about 10 percent capability every six weeks. That'll slow down again after four months. But I should be completely deaf by this time next year, that is, if—"

"If it's the singular form," Candy said softly. The quaver was gone. She was all strength and support now and would remain so, whatever happened. I hope she has enough for two, because I may need it. The singular form would slowly liquify the auditory system, literally turning his ears to water. He would be forced to endure his hearing, his music, his art literally dissolving away. That is, if it was the Decomp Singular.

The Decomp Multiplar variety, or Decomplex, would not stop there. Carried through the Eustachian tubes, it would attack the nostrils, taste centers, vocal cords, eyes, and then the brain itself. He would die a very unpleasant death. Decomp Multiplar. Steele's Disease. Artan Virus.

"It's funny, Can. We cured cancer, smallpox, T.B., all the old earthly disasters. Then we went out to the stars and picked up a whole flock of new ones, like carrion birds. If it is . . . well, I suppose there are worse ways to go.

"No!" Candy cried fiercely. All we know is that it's Decomp. Forty percent of Decomp is Multiplar, and we'll cross that if we come to it. Chances are you'll be deaf, but it's not the end of the world."

"Damned near it is! Damned near. Candy, I'm a songwriter, a singer, a musician. I could lose anything, but not my ears. Not that."

"That didn't stop Beethoven."

"Beethoven was old. I'm twenty-eight years old. If I live, I'll be deaf. I'll be alive, I'll have you, but I won't be the man you married."

"You'll always be the man I married, damn you!" She slapped him once, hard, across the face. For a moment she seemed about to burst into tears, but instead she took his head in both hands and moved it very close to her own. The sunset was golden in her eyes.

"Nothing will ever touch what we have. You made that clear to me a long time ago, and I believed you, and don't you dare take that back. Don't you dare, do you hear me?"

He broke into an involuntary smile. She was his greatest outside strength, and whatever else, it was still there. "Yeah, I hear you. And after I no longer can hear you, you'll kick it into me, won't you?"

"Damn straight."

"Let's go to bed, or something."

She laughed, and led him back into the house.

• • •

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There's no caring where I'm going
From the place where love has been
To the land that I am moving
From the land that I have seen
And the greenscape of the river
Leads me upstream toward the land
To the place of rocks and sand
To the end, to my last stand
No green or blue, my life is now in red and gray
No life, and in death no longer free
For I am a creature of water
And I have lost the sea
I am a creature of water
And I have lost the sea.

The band was kind, and inventive. They discovered tricks with earjacks to keep Adler hearing the backup. They gave him plenty of time to fine-tune his old guitar, his mandola, and for him to respond to their efforts. They cut him sufficient slack. They knew. And they agreed to canceling the last three gigs because they were off-planet and he would need to be home, with Candy, as the last of his hearing went. As he slowly discovered whether there would be other losses.

McAllister was an old friend, but the treatments would be expensive, and if things went from bad to worse, to the unthinkable, Adler was determined to leave Candy provided for. So he arranged for two cutting sessions, two LP slugs. The second bore the song he now tended — bitterly —to think of as his theme. "Creature of Water." Candy began teaching him both sign and lipreading. McAllister continued his tests. The band toured. And Walter Adler's hearing declined. Finally, rather than admit to the press and public what was becoming increasingly obvious, he canceled the last two stops on the tour and prepared to return home. He had had two dizzy spells on the African leg, and then, on the last night in Bikoville, he collapsed in his dressing room.

He awoke to find Tom Shandy sitting by his cot. The little Irishman refused to let him up. "You stay down. Kerry vided Doc McAllister, and he's on his way. He'll be here in an hour."

"Shit, I'm fine. We did the concert. Let's just go home."

"No chance, kid," Tom replied, keeping his face centered, enunciating carefully. Adler was grateful. His hearing could make out just about one out of four words. "Until we find out if we can move you safely, you stay here and you stay down, if I have to hold you down."

"Try it. I'm bigger than you."

"Then I'll get Kerry to help me. And Suze will sit on your chest. You stay down."

"Shit."

And down he was forty-five minutes later when McAllister arrived. He shooed the band out and sat down by the bed.

"Hiya, Doc."

"Stick out your tongue."

"No machines? You're slipping. . . ."

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"Just do it."

McAllister probed his ears, eyes, and mouth. He checked his temperature, ran EKG, EEG, and did a Brookes Scan. Finally he entered the data in his comp and sat back.

"You had a faint?"

"You got to look at me, Doc. I can't make you out."

"Sorry." McAllister turned his beaky face to Adler and spoke slowly. "You passed out?"

"Yes."

"Any dizzy spells?"

"Yes, in Nairobi and Bulawayo."

"It's Multiplar, Walter. I'm sorry." McAllister sat back, as if surprised that he'd been able to say such a thing so quickly. That he had been able to say it at all. The room was suddenly very large and cold, and all the furniture had been designed for giants. The sea was roaring in the remains of Walter Adler's ears.

The standard question. "How long have I got? Give it to me straight. No soft shoe."

McAllister mopped the sweat off his own forehead, then automatically reached out to Adler's, but the younger man caught his arm and held it. Gently.

"Doc, please."

"Your hearing should be gone in two weeks, perhaps three. You should be free of dizzy spells for some time after that. You'll start losing taste and smell in four months. That'll take about three months to go. The eyes will start to dissolve at about that time, and the dizziness will return. And headaches. By the time your eyes are . . . gone, brain dysfunction will start. You've got about a year."

"A year. But I'm O.K. now?"

"Uh, yes."

"Then I can get up?"

"Certainly."

Adler rose and paced across the room. "I feel fine. Why can't I be fine? Why me?" He stripped his shirt and vest off and threw them over the chair. From the closet he took his own shirt and jacket. "Look, there's no way out of this . . . ?"

McAllister shook his head. "There's nothing I can do."

"I didn't ask that. I asked if there was a way out. Something you can't do."

"Maybe."

Adler froze. "Maybe . . . I expected a moment of agonized silence before you said 'no.' But what, what maybe? Cryonic freezing? Because that's no answer."

"No," McAllister snapped. "Not freezing. There is no cure, but the body can be taught to adapt, to live with it. . . ."

"How live? Without a brain?"

"No, Walter. It can be arrested."

The silence between them was long and uncomfortable. Once Tom knocked on the door, and they both told him to wait. Finally, Adler turned to the mirror. He reached a hand to his ears, now hanging uselessly on his

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skull, like ornamental architecture.

"Doc, you'd better explain. Please, before I start hoping."

TELEX BIKOVILLE 1430/99657
MRS WALTER ADLER
2333 MULHOLLAND DRIVE
LOS ANGELES CA USA

CANDY, FORGIVE ME FOR TELLING YOU THIS WAY, BUT I COULDN'T BEAR TO DO THIS ON VID, AND IF I CAME HOME, I WOULDN'T LEAVE. AND I HAVE TO, AT LEAST FOR A WHILE. IF THE FATES ARE KIND, OR JUST, I'LL BE BACK.

DOC SAYS THERE'S A CHANCE. HE'LL EXPLAIN IT TO YOU FULLY BUT I WANT YOU TO HEAR THE BASICS FROM ME. SO YOU'LL KNOW WHY I HAVE TO GO.

WE BOTH READ UP ON DECOMP. ARTAN'S. IT ORIGINATED ON ARTAN, THE ONLY SLIGHTLY HABITABLE PLANET IN THE CERXES SYSTEM. MORONI STEELE SPREAD IT OVER HALF THE POPULATED WORLDS BEFORE THEY TRACED IT BACK TO HIM. LUCKILY, IT'S NOT THAT COMMON. WELL, LUCKY FOR SOMEONE. BUT DOC SAYS THAT THE ARTANS, OR WHATEVER THEY CALL THEMSELVES, ALSO SUFFERED FROM THE DISEASE AND THEY SOMEHOW LICKED IT. NOT BY DRUGS. IT'S NOT EVEN A CURE. IT'S MORE OF A PERSONAL ADAPTATION TO A PERMANENT CONDITION. THEY'VE LEARNED TO HEAR WITHOUT EARS BY SOMEHOW SEEING SOUND. MY HEARING IS GOING, BUT IF I CAN REACH ARTAN AND BE ACCEPTED FOR TREATMENT BEFORE I LOSE MY EYES, THEY MAY SOMEHOW BE ABLE TO ARREST THE CONDITION. AND I MAY BE ABLE TO LEARN TO HEAR WITH MY EYES. AND KEEP MY MUSIC. AND COME HOME.

I HAVE TO LEAVE NOW. I HOPE TO BE BACK, BUT IF I'M NOT, IF IT DOESN'T WORK, TOM AND DOC WILL HELP YOU TAKE CARE OF THINGS. AND IF I DON'T RETURN, KNOW THAT I LOVE YOU. THAT YOU WERE THE BEST THING THAT EVER HAPPENED TO ME, AND THAT ALL THOSE SONGS I WROTE FOR YOU NEVER EVEN SCRATCHED THE SURFACE OF WHAT I FEEL. YOU WILL ALWAYS BE THE OTHER PART OF ME.

THEY'RE CALLING MY SHIP. I HAVE YOUR PICTURE AND MY EYES. AND I HAVE MY MIND. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.

WALTER

His hearing was gone by the time he touched down on New Britannia.

On Loosestrife he could taste nothing.

The dizzy spells returned on Sallyport.

But when he landed on Artan, his sight was still clear.

I am old, and the ships pass me by
from the sea
I am still, with age and stone and
steel
And the land is red
And the water living green
And I hang suspended in between,
in between
And your love is all that I feel

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For you follow my drive
Through the great red shift
And I wait on the mesa where the starships lift
And the black void shines
With the stars so fine
And the distance is a trillion-mile rift
But I wear your face inside
Where my memories hide
And the life that we lived is my future's guide
And when I die on some plain
On the last world out
Still searching for an answer never found
And they put me in the water
Or the land or the ground
And the creaking of the worlds makes a last dark sound
And the spheres roll on and the spheres roll round
And the dust comes back once again
Then I'll find that sea
And you'll be with me
In the water, in the ocean, in the sea.

The Terrans circled hermetically high above the olive green world in a sealed steel ring. There was no need. Decomp knew no barriers to its slow and selective spread.

From the ring, Adler dropped by shuttle to Nukuhiva, the research station on the shore of Tongabatu/Shaloka, Artan's small, sterile continent. It was an awakening. Adler was grateful that he could still see it.

The shuttle field was a rough rectangle of coralite on a bluff above the khaki ocean — an ocean of water rich in chemical stews and vegetable salads. Nukuhiva's establishment consisted of a triangle of buildings, several docks, a freshwater tank, and a separate dispensary. The water was potable if treated, the oxygen adequate, the local life-forms indigestible. Adler was assigned to a barracks attached to the dispensary where transients stayed, people who had come to Artan for the treatment of Decomp. There was only one other occupant.

After ascertaining that he could see and speak, but neither hear, taste, nor smell, the attendant introduced Adler to his roommate.

"His name is Moonahan. He's not responding to the treatment. He got here too late. He won't make trouble. If he bothers you, kick him."

Adler was shocked by the man's insensitivity, but then the attendant probably had seen many others. He was cold to the suffering as a resistance toward the idea of getting the disease himself. Adler longed to ask him how many had passed through Nukuhiva, but he felt a warning and held his tongue. The attendant shrugged and withdrew.

Moonahan sat on a bed, staring at nothing. The sockets of his eyes were empty, though they seemed to be smeared with a greasy substance that obscured any internal details, and for

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this Adler was grateful. It was safe, then, to assume that the man was also deaf, dumb, and probably insane. While Adler watched, Moonahan shuddered slightly as if some tremor had passed through him — some tiny earthquake that only he could feel — then fell motionless. Adler moved to the window. The sea lay below, like a viscid gel.

Is that where I'm going? What am I doing here? I could be living out my life with Candy. Then he looked again at Moonahan, at those greasy, empty eyes, and thought better of it. Better never to have her see me that way.

The Artan came for him in the morning. It was totally alien and yet no surprise. Somehow it was everything that Adler had expected.

In height and build and bilateral symmetry, the Artan was humanoid, but there the similarity ended. The skin was a soft green and lightly scaled. The neck contained a rank of gill slits, though it appeared to breathe through its mouth while on land, and the mouth was wide, appearing to contain a baleen or strainer. Adler considered the suspended matter of the sea. The Artans must literally live in a nutrient soup. The nostrils were wide and membranous, the eyes all pupils with no whites. He guessed that they probably contained nictitating lids as well. There were no ears.

Of course. There was no Decomp among the Artans. It had passed through them ages ago, adapting them, mutating, probably culling out the weaker strains, though the creature did not look particularly strong, but wiry, tough. The hands ended in tentacular fingers, three of them, all mutually opposing. The feet were spatulate paddles. They looked painful to walk upon but very efficient for swimming.

The Artan raised its hands and made a series of rapid yet somehow familiar movements. Adler blinked, and slowly shook his head. The Artan repeated the gesture again and again. It was sign — the alphabet of the deaf, yet strange because of those three sinuous fingers.

"Yes, yes, I understand." The Artan looked pleased. He slowly spelled out:

=My=name=is=Water=Speaker=how=are=you called=?=

=My=name= — but Water Speaker raised a cautionary halt. He made the sign for speaking.

"You can hear?"

=I=can=see=

Lipreading? No, not likely. Their physiognomy was too different. What had McAllister said? They see sound.

"My name is Walter Adler."

=I=cannot=form=that=name=but=I=hear=see=you=

"It could be Water Eagle. . . ." Adler replied with a smile. The Artan returned the smile, or mimicked the expression out of politeness.

=I=cannot=form=that=word=

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Of course. No eagles here. Bird? "How about Water Flyer?"

=Water=Flyer=

=Water=Speaker=

=Come=with=me=Water=Flyer=

Water Speaker hobbled painfully to the door of the barracks. Moonahan seemed to take no notice as Adler passed him and followed the Artan out to the shoreline.

Artan's dull copper sun was at zenith, giving little warmth and less shadow. Adler noticed the dispensary attendant watching him from the porch of the clinic, but when Adler waved, the attendant turned his back and went inside.

=My=home= Speaker signaled.

"I understand." Speaker made a gesture toward the sea.

"You will teach me to hear?"

=We=will=try=

The water was filthy, but pleasingly warm.

Dearest Candy,

I know that it has been awhile, and I'm sorry. I hope you got the telex. I sent two, just to make sure. I cannot write long, as it is somewhat painful — a result of the treatments, I guess. But they seem to be working. It is now eight months, but I can still see and speak. And sing. The Artan treatments — which are not treatments per se, but more along the lines of bodily adjustments or orientations — seem to have arrested the progress of the disease. Water Speaker, my doctor/therapist/guide, says that within the month they will start teaching me to hear again. I miss the sound of your voice.

I have to go. I'm giving a concert tonight for the Artans and those of the research station personnel who'll come, so I'd better hurry along. I miss you and love you. I hope you are well.

Yours,
Walter

He set down the pen and massaged his hand. It did not exactly ache. It seemed somehow foreign to be writing with it. A hand was for eating, speaking, and playing his instruments. And swimming.

He hung suspended in the rich nutrient sea, his nostrils above the surface by a millimeter. It no longer tickled or hurt his eyes. It no longer seemed strange. Many League Swimmer and Sea Voice held his ankles, Deep Fisher and Child of Water his wrists. Water Speaker enfolded his head gently in curving fingers.

High above him, lightning played across the cloudy skies of Artan, reflecting in the water that lay upon the surface of his open eyes. Particles of living food floated gently on the curving retinas. And rippling patterns of light.

The five Artans, and beyond them hundreds more, set the sea alive with voiceless sounds.

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. . .

Voiceless, I sing to you
Eyeless, I see
Across the distances, distances
And the spark of life I cling to
Makes me heedless of the danger
The cold, the end
Of a stranger
For my cocoon has opened
I have shed my tail
Take flight
Take wing
Above the waters glide and sail
But I remember you
And sing
Across the distances, distances.

"Speaker?"

=Yes=my=friend=

"Was it so difficult for the others?"

=Others=?=

"The others who came here, to be cured."

They floated, faceup, just beyond the end of the pier. Two Terran mechanics fussed with the engine of a slapboat, ignoring them. The metallic sun beat down, warming their exposed surfaces, though the water was hardly cold.

=I=thought=you=knew=

"Knew?"

=There=were=no=others=others=who=succeeded=so=well=

Adler rolled over, sending eddies of briny particles outward. With a snort that cleared his nose, he came to rest head upward, treading water slowly.

"You mean to tell me. . . . But I had heard. . . . "

Speaker made the sign for laughter.

=Many=died=some=lived=but=all=lost=their=hearing= =You=are=the=first=to=see=sound=

"I am? How? Why?"

=You=sing=

I sing, Adler thought. I came out here to save my music, and now I see sound because I sing.

"Adler."

The attendant was standing on the dock, his voice a spray of red and brown. Adler bobbed upright.

"Yes."

"You have a visitor. In the barracks." He turned on his heel — Adler could sense disapproval, disgust — and stalked back down the dock. He looked at Speaker, then struck off toward the barracks.

She was standing by a window in the empty room, her hands clasped anxiously together, wearing the same rust-colored suit she'd worn that day he'd told her. He stood dripping, conscious of his nakedness.

"Hello," she said, uncertainly.

"Hello. How did you get here?"

She laughed uncomfortably. "On a starship, of course. Are you all right? Your eyes. . . ."

"I know they look strange, but I can see fine."

"You've changed."

"That's why I came. Otherwise I'd be dead."

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They stood in the oppressive silence, beside the cot that had been Moonahan's. He felt the nutrient drying on his skin.

"Look, let me shower and get dressed, and we'll go for a walk."

"Is it just your eyes?" Her voice was heavy with apprehension, with the fear of being excluded. He took one of her hands in his. Left hand. Wedding ring. Artans did not know such things.

"My body temperature is lower. My heart beats slower. I take less solid food. I'm a better swimmer than I was. I'm healthier. And I can see sound." He smiled shyly. "And I'm not going to die, not for a long time."

She did not look convinced.

"I'm still the man you love, the man you married. The man who wrote you those songs, Can."

She buried her head on his shoulder, and he knew that she was searching for the warmth that he had lost.

"I can wear s-sun glasses," he stammered, desperately adrift. "In the dark, you'll see. I'm the same."

But he wasn't, and she knew. Miserably, they waited for the night.

"No, no, Walter, stop. Please, it's no good. I can't." He said nothing, just rolled over and found to his surprise that his new eyes would not cry.

In the week before the ship left, she gave it a chance. He had to admit that. She met Water Speaker and the others and had long conversations about the therapy, about the process that had saved and changed her husband. And he was changed. The news she brought from home did not touch him the way he had expected it to. No, I am not the man you married, nor you the woman I thought, and in that instant he was consumed by the loneliness that he knew was coming.

That last night they lay together and he held her as she cried herself to sleep, as she had done every night since her coming. And he wished and prayed that it could be back the way it was, that things could be put back. That everything could somehow start again.

And in the morning, she was gone.

The cave was comfortable and well appointed. Thanks to the active connivance of a few of the more sympathetic members of the research station, he was able to use a slapboat to move his personal belongings, plus an assortment of "liberated" supplies, down the coast to the site Water Speaker had located. Fifty-five klics from the settlement, tucked into a broad, shallow bay, and fronted by a string of sheltering islands, it was as good as he could have hoped.

The cave — most of it a slanting fissure between two of the clay plates that made up the surface of Artan's little continent — was deep and roomy. It had no natural lighting — nor did it need any, for Adler's eyes

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now sought out heat as well as magnifying the slightest ambient light. One circular declivity he modified for use as an echo chamber for the analysis of sound-color. In another linear stretch, he planted colonies of a local mushroomlike fungus to enhance his regular diet of nutrient seawater and packaged foods. His living area held a sleeping mat, his instruments, a few books and mementos. In a niche near the opening, he placed Candy's picture, situated so that the light of the setting copper sun would fall upon it.

He wondered often, in the days that followed, why he had kept her picture. Her desertion had shaken him profoundly. He had gone into a deep depression, refusing to eat or speak, until both human and Artans had feared for his safety. Finally, his ample patience gone, Water Speaker had brought Adler his guitar.

=Play=

=No=

=Speak=aloud=

Adler had shaken his head. Speaker had repeated the command, this time with emphasis, but Adler had refused again to respond. Speaker then squatted painfully down in front of him and signed:

=We=have=given=you=back=your=music=If=you=do=not=wish=to=appreciate=it=give=us=back=your=eyes=

Then, without warning, Speaker had lunged, his three-fingered hands seeking to blind Adler, and the two had gone over, rolling painfully in the coral. Speaker had seriously attempted to gouge out his eyes, and Adler had been forced to fight back.

Normally stronger than his Artan friend, Adler's condition had been weakened by lack of food, and he fought desperately across the coral until Speaker, panting from exertion, had broken off the attack. Sheepishly, the two had retired to lick their wounds, and neither had spoken of it since.

Adler set his guitar against the wall and moved to the opening to watch the setting sun. It washed through the cave and splashed off Candy's picture. The golden eyes seemed to glow. Two years. The slapboat came every three months to check on him, and never had there been a letter. After the first year he had stopped asking.

Now when he looked at her picture, he remembered her as she had been before he had come to Artan: Loving, supportive. That time was past.

As the sun touched the sea, the waters of the bay began to boil with Artans coming in for the dusk singing. The colors always seemed to flow brightest at sun's dying. Adler smiled, hoisted his guitar and sounder, and started down for the beach, moving carefully, the coral harsh on his long, soft feet.

Adler sat on the sand cliff, one of the few soft points on the surface of

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the land. Beside him sat Water Speaker, Long Swimmer, and Long Swimmer's mate. They watched the couple's young children playing in the gentle surf. There were few predators in the seas of Artan, but they each kept an eye toward that eventuality.

=You=have=been=with=us=six=cycles=now=

Six cycles. Four years. Adler shrugged. "There is no place I would rather be." Long Swimmer and his mate exchanged smiles. They were new and still enthralled by the colors of his voice.

=That=is=not=entirely=true=

"Very perceptive. Yes, there is no place I feel at home, but here I am accepted."

=We=know=you=are=our=friend=We=love=you=

"I know. I'm grateful."

=But=you=are=not=happy=

He thought of her picture up in the cave. No, not happy, not anywhere but the past. Not happy, not whole. Artan eyes and baleen; long, wide hands and feet; deaf, but still human. Human, yet in between.

Long Swimmer and his mate ran happily down to the nourishing sea, splashing in to frolic with their children. He thought again of Candy, then put it out of his mind. Water Speaker still waited attentively. Adler looked at him, then sighed, a tiny exhalation of blue-violet.

"I still have my music."

June 8, 1983
Pasadena, California
For Mary

Coming soon

A new tale of the Great North Rift, a novella titled GOOD NIGHT, SWEETHEARTS by James Tiptree, Jr. Plus new stories by Ron Goulart, John Brunner, Michael Shea, Robert F. Young, Michael Bishop, Kim Stanley Robinson, Lucius Shepard, George Alec Effinger and many others. Use the coupon on page 162 to enter your own subscription or to send Christmas gifts.

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CHEMISTRY OF THE VOID

I attended the Mystery Writers of America annual awards banquet earlier this year, along with my dear wife, Janet. We're a little sentimental about the function, for we had first met, twenty-six years earlier, at one of those banquets.

In any case, I had been asked to hand out the Edgar for the best mystery novel of the year. Since this was the highest category of award, it came last, and we sat patiently through the ceremony as a dozen successive speakers worked at being witty and clever.

Janet began to feel apprehensive. She knew that I was just a wee bit less than grateful for this opportunity to hand out a particularly important Edgar inasmuch as I myself had never been so much as *nominated* for anything by the MWA. She could tell I was listening to all that wittiness and cleverness and was considering ways and means of topping them all.

So she leaned toward me and said, "Isaac, those poor nominees for the best novel have been in agonizing suspense all evening. Don't stretch it out. Just announce the five titles and authors and then read out the winner."

"Yes, dear," I said (I'm a remarkably well-behaved husband). "I will just announce the nominees and the winner."

And then came my moment and I bounded up to the podium in my us-

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ual youthful manner and read a sentence from the form letter I had gotten giving me directions as to how to be an awarder. I was told that some of the names would be very difficult to pronounce and that if I had any problems, I was to call the MWA office in order that I might be coached on pronunciation.

I then folded the letter, put it in my pocket, said that I was proud of the multi-ethnic and pluralistic nature of American society, and would scorn to seek help. I would pronounce all the difficult names as best I could if the audience would bear with me.

I then turned to the list of five nominees, which happened, by the purest of coincidence, to include only authors whose names were particularly simple Anglo-Saxon in derivation. I read each book title, then hesitated over the name of the author, scanning it anxiously, then sounding it out with just a touch of difficulty and being rewarded each time with a roar of laughter. When I finished, and reached for the envelope that contained the name of the winner, I said sadly that it would probably contain the most complicated name of all, which I would then have to pronounce a second time. Sure enough, the winner was Ross Thomas, a name I pronounced with great difficulty. I got my sixth and loudest laugh and returned to my seat.

"All I did was read the names, dear," I said to Janet.

Fortunately, in writing these essays, there is no one at my elbow urging me to be brief, so I will now continue, in leisurely fashion, from the point where I left off last month.

Last month, I talked about the void, the nearly empty spaces outside the immediate vicinity of large bodies. By Earthly standards, the void is a vacuum and contains nothing — but not *altogether* nothing. It contains tenuous clouds of dust and gas, here and there. Even the clearest void, far removed from any star, must contain scattered atoms of one sort or another?

The question is: *what* sort or another?

Is there any way of analyzing an almost complete vacuum, at very long distance, in order to determine the nature of the thin, thin scattering of matter that it contains?

The beginning of an answer came in 1904. A German astronomer, Johannes Franz Hartmann (1865-1936), was studying the spectroscopic lines of a binary star, Delta Orionis. The two stars of the binary were too close to see as separate objects in the telescope, but as they swung

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about each other, first one would recede from us while the other approached, and then the other would recede as the first approached.

Both stars had spectroscopic lines, and when one receded while the other approached, one set of lines moved toward the red end of the spectrum, while the other moved toward the violet end. When the stars reversed their motion, so did the spectral lines. In other words, the spectral lines of the binary system would become double as the two stars swung about each other, then would merge as one star eclipsed the other, then would become double again in the other direction — over and over again.

But Hartmann noticed that one particular line *didn't move.* It was the line that represented atoms of the element calcium. The calcium can't be part of either star because both stars are moving. It has to be part of something that is stationary with respect to those stars and that has to be the faint wisps of interstellar gas that lie between the stars and the Earth. Those wisps are extraordinarily tenuous, but the number of atoms builds up in the light-years that separate the binary from ourselves, and the starlight en route encounters enough of them to have the calcium wavelength detectably absorbed. Hartmann had, in effect, identified calcium among the components of interstellar gas.

Naturally, this wasn't accepted at once. There were other studies made, with conflicting results, and all sorts of competing theories were advanced. It was not till 1926 that the work of the English astronomer Arthur Stanley Eddington (1882-1944) showed convincingly that the interstellar gas explanation was correct. By that time, other types of atoms, such as those of sodium, potassium, and titanium, had also been detected in the interstellar gas.

These metals are relatively common elements on Earth, and, presumably, in the Universe in general. It was by then known, however, that hydrogen is by far the predominant element in the Universe and should be predominant in the interstellar gas, too. About 90 percent of all the atoms in the Universe are hydrogen and 9 percent are helium. Everything else put together makes up only about 1 percent at most. Why should one detect the minor constituents and not the overwhelming ones?

The answer is simple. Atoms such as calcium happen to absorb certain wavelengths of visible light quite strongly. Hydrogen and helium don't. Therefore, in studying the spectrum of visible light, the dark lines belonging to calcium and other such atoms in the void are detected. Nothing is seen in the case of hydrogen and helium.

Under one condition, hydrogen does become visible. A hydrogen

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atom consists of a nucleus with one positive charge that is cancelled by the negative charge of a single electron on the outskirts of the atom. The nucleus and electron together make up a "neutral hydrogen atom." If there is a hot star in the vicinity, however, the energetic radiation it releases tears the electron away from the nucleus, leaving a "hydrogen ion" behind. From time to time, the hydrogen ion recombines with the electron, giving off the spurt of energy that had been required to separate them, and this spurt can be detected.

Such hydrogen ion emissions were noted in luminous nebulae and could also be used to study the hot young stars in which the spiral arms of galaxies were rich, since the intense radiation of those stars formed sizable amounts of ionized hydrogen for light-years about. In 1951, the American astronomer William Wilson Morgan (1906-) was able to map the curves of ionized hydrogen that marked out the spiral arms of our own Galaxy, in one of which our Sun is located. Until then, our Galaxy had been assumed to have a spiral structure, but this was the first piece of direct evidence.

Hydrogen ions, however, were found in only certain spots of the Galaxy By far the major portion of the Galaxy consisted of small, dim stars. The space between these consisted of a thin gas of neutral hydrogen atoms that were invisible as far as ordinary light spectra were concerned. However, even as ionized hydrogen was being used to map the Galaxy's spiral arms, the situation with respect to neutral hydrogen atoms changed.

The German army had occupied the Netherlands in 1940 and had placed the land under the dark shadow of Nazi tyranny. Ordinary astronomical research became impossible, and a young Dutch astronomer, Hendrik Christoffell Van de Hulst (1918-), was forced to see what he could do with nothing more than pen and paper.

The neutral hydrogen atom can exist in two forms. In one, the electron and the nucleus spin in the same direction; in the other, they spin in opposite directions. The two forms have a slightly different energy content. A vagrant photon of starlight might be absorbed by the lower energy form which would then be converted into the higher energy form. That higher energy form would spontaneously slip back into the lower energy form, sooner or later, and give off the energy it had absorbed.

In 1944, van de Hulst showed that the energy given off would be in the form of a microwave photon with a wavelength of 21 centimeters (which would be about a 40-millionth as energetic as visible light). Any single hydrogen atom would emit that 21-centimeter wavelength only

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every million years on the average, but there are so many hydrogen atoms in outer space altogether that at any given moment large numbers are giving off these microwave photons, and these could, in theory, be detected.

Prior to World War II, however, the instruments for the detection of such weak photons were lacking.

But just before World War II radar was developed and, during the war, a vast amount of research was put into it. Radar, as it happens, works with microwave beams, and by the end of the war, a great deal of technology had been worked out for microwave detection. Radio astronomy had become practical.

Using the new techniques, the American astronomer Edward Mills Purcell (1912-) detected the 21-centimeter radiation in 1951. It was now possible to study cold interstellar hydrogen and gain a vast amount of new information about the Galaxy as a result.

What's more, the new techniques of radio astronomy could be used to detect still other components of the interstellar gas.

For instance, the singly-charged nucleus of the ordinary hydrogen atom consists of one proton and nothing else. There are a few hydrogen atoms, however, with a nucleus consisting of one proton and one neutron. Such a nucleus still has a single positive charge but is twice as massive as an ordinary hydrogen nucleus. This more massive hydrogen atom is usually called "deuterium."

Deuterium, like ordinary hydrogen, has two energy states, and in slipping from the more energetic to the less, it emits a microwave photon with a wavelength of 91 centimeters. This radiation was detected by American astronomers at the University of Chicago in 1966, and we now know that about 5 percent of interstellar hydrogen is in the form of deuterium. In that same year, a Soviet astronomer detected the characteristic microwave radiation of the helium atom.

The dozen most common atoms present in the Universe (and, therefore, in interstellar gas), in order of decreasing abundance, are hydrogen (H), helium (He), oxygen (O), neon (Ne), nitrogen (N), carbon (C), silicon (Si), magnesium (Mg), iron (Fe), sulfur (S), argon (Ar) and aluminum (Al).

As I said earlier, hydrogen and helium together make up 99 percent of the atoms in the Universe. If these are set aside, the ten other types of atoms I have listed make up more than 99.5 percent of all the other

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atoms. In short, less than 1 in every 20,000 atoms in the Universe are of varieties other than the dozen I have listed. They can be ignored in what follows.

Let us now consider whether it is possible that the atoms of interstellar gas can exist there as anything other than single atoms. Can two or more atoms combine to form a molecule?

To combine, the atoms must first collide, and the individual atoms in the interstellar void are so far apart that collisions take place only very rarely. However, collisions do take place, and since the Universe has existed in more or less its present condition for 10 to 14 billion years, there would in time have been many, many collisions and many molecules would have been formed. To be sure, molecules, once formed, must withstand further collisions with radiation and energetic particles that would tend to break them apart again, but the balance between formation and breakup may be such that at any moment there would be bound to be a certain number of molecules in existence.

And what kind of molecules would those be? To begin with, we can eliminate all atoms but the twelve types I have listed. Any other kind would be far too few to be involved in the formation of molecules in detectable concentration. Of the twelve listed, we can leave out three, since atoms of helium, neon, and argon simply do not combine with other atoms under any known conditions. As for silicon, magnesium, iron and aluminum, they are not likely to form small molecules but tend to add on more and more atoms of themselves, with others such as those of oxygen, to form dust particles.

Such dust particles make up only about 1 percent of the mass of interstellar gas, but their presence is unmistakeable. The individual atoms and small molecules of interstellar gas do not absorb significant amounts of sunlight, so that outer space is, generally, transparent.

Dust, however, is strongly absorbent. A mass of dust will absorb 100,000 times as much starlight as an equal mass of gas. In those volumes of space where interstellar dust is moderately abundant, the stars that lie behind them (relative to Earth) are dimmed and reddened. If the dust is abundant enough, the stars are hidden altogether, and we have the "dark nebulae" I mentioned in last month's essay. (Individual atoms of the types usually making up dust particles are to be found in space, either not having yet bound themselves to the particles, or having been knocked loose from them. These account for spectral lines like those first detected by Hartmann.)

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If we are thinking of true molecules, then, and not dust particles, we must confine ourselves to five types of atoms: hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, carbon, and sulfur, in that order of decreasing abundance.

Would combinations of these atoms exist in detectable quantity? The answer is "Yes," for some combinations actually radiate in the visible light region when losing absorbed energy, and these could be detected by ordinary spectroscopic means even as early as 1941. Three such combinations are the carbon-nitrogen combination, "cyanide" (CN); the carbon-hydrogen combination, "methine" (CH); and methine with an electron missing, (CH^+).

These three combinations would not exist on Earth. They could form, yes, but they would be very active and would quickly combine with other atoms or molecules in the environment to to form more complicated and more stable molecules. In the interstellar gas, however, collisions are so few that these unstable combinations have no choice but to remain in existence at least to some extent.

There are no other likely molecular combinations that are apt to radiate in the visible light region, so it seemed for a while as though astronomers had reached their limit. In 1953, however, the Soviet astronomer Iosif Samuilovich Shklovskii (1916-1985) pointed out that the oxygen atom was more common than either carbon or nitrogen, so that the oxygen-hydrogen combination, "hydroxyl" (OH), was sure to be more common than either cyanide or methine. It, too, is unstable and wouldn't exist on Earth but should exist in the tenuous gas wisps of interstellar space. However, it would not give off visible light, but microwave photons instead.

Calculations showed that hydroxyl would give off four different characteristic wavelengths of microwaves, and these would serve as its "fingerprint." In October, 1963, the fingerprint of hydroxyl was detected and astronomers therefore had the key to further identifications.

For instance, with hydrogen the most common, by far, of the components of interstellar gas, we can expect that about 99.8 percent of random collisions would involve two hydrogen atoms. That means that a hydrogen-hydrogen combination, the "hydrogen molecule" (HH, or H_2) should be the most common molecule in space. In 1970, the characteristic microwave radiation of the hydrogen molecule was detected in interstellar gas clouds.

At the present time, thirteen different two-atom combinations have been detected in space. They are HH, CO, CH, CH^+, CN, CS, CC, OH,

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NO, NS, SO, SiO, and SiS. The last two involve the silicon atom, and those may be incipient dust particles. Notice also that six of the thirteen involve the carbon atom.

In the middle 1960's, astronomers did not seriously expect to detect any atom combinations in space containing three or more atoms. They were sure that these could be formed through occasional lucky hits of a two-atom combination with an atom of hydrogen, or (less likely) with some other type of atom, or (least likely) with another two-atom combination. Yet it seemed that combinations of three or more atoms could scarcely be formed in detectable amounts in this way even in gas clouds where the atoms were more thickly distributed than in interstellar space generally, and where collisions were more likely to take place.

In 1968, however, came the big surprise that revolutionized ideas on the subject and established the new science of "astrochemistry." In November of that year, the tell-tale microwave fingerprints of the water molecule (H_2O) and the ammonia molecule (NH_3) were detected. The water molecule, as you see, consists of three atoms and the ammonia molecule of four.

These molecules are very stable and are common on planetary bodies. Earth has whole oceans of water, and the gas giants have atmospheres rich in ammonia. The problem is, though, how such complicated molecules could have been formed in detectable quantities in interstellar gas clouds in which the necessary collisons are not likely to take place often.

By now, no fewer than thirteen different three-atom combinations have been detected in interstellar space, ot which eight contain a carbon atom. In addition, nine different four-atom combinations have been detected, of which eight contain a carbon atom (the ammonia molecule, itself, being the only one that does not).

The latest count I have seen lists twenty-four combinations of more than four atoms, and every one of them contains carbon atoms. The largest is a thirteen-atom molecule made up of a string of eleven carbon atoms with a hydrogen atom at one end and a nitrogen atom at the other end.

The more complicated these interstellar molecules are, the greater the puzzle of their formation. For one thing, the larger the molecule, the more rickety it is and the more likely it is that it would be broken up by stray photons of starlight. The feeling is, however, that the dust particles that exist in the interstellar gas clouds serve to shield the

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forming molecules and make it possible for them to continue to exist.

Various schemes of different collisions under different conditions have been advanced, and calculations based on these assumptions have been used to work out the kinds and relative number of molecules that are formed. None of the calculations are on the nose, but some end up in the ballpark. The general conclusion is that interstellar chemistry is strange because of the very unusual conditions (as compared with those with which we are familiar) but is not illegal. That is, the chemical and physical laws followed in the formation of those large interstellar molecules are the same as those we witness on Earth.

It is interesting that of the 59 different molecules identified in space, 46 contain carbon atoms, including all but one of the combinations possessing more than three atoms. It would seem that in outer space, under a near-vacuum state, and with conditions extremely different from that on Earth, it is nevertheless the carbon atom and no other on which complexity builds. This supports the conclusion I reached, for instance, in my essay THE ONE AND ONLY (F & SF, November, 1972).

There seems to be no doubt among astronomers that the 59 different atom-combinations so far detected do not include all that there are. There may be hundreds, or thousands of different combinations in the gas clouds, but detecting them is a problem. Clearly, the more complicated the molecule, the more interesting it is — but the fewer the numbers formed and the more difficult they will be to detect.

For instance, it isn't hard to imagine that, hidden among the cubic light-years of a gas cloud, there may be traces, here and there, of simple sugar molecules or of amino acids. These traces, if collected over the entire vast volume may amount to tons and tons, but spread out as they are, they may be indetectable in the foreseeable future.

There is the importance of working out exactly how the molecules we have already detected have been formed. If we can work out an acceptable scheme we may be able to calculate just what additional, more complicated, molecules may be formed. That may present us with some pretty startling possibilities.

The British astronomer Fred Hoyle, for instance, already suspects that molecules may be built up in the interstellar clouds that are complex enough to possess some of the properties of life, though he remains a minority of just about one in this.

Still, it does seem very likely that the makeup of the interstellar gas-clouds is relevant to the formation of life, even if they do not contain

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life themselves.

Our Solar system condensed out of an interstellar cloud of dust and gas, and while the solid chunks and clumps that formed the Earth must have been heated in the process to the point where complicated carbon compounds, if any existed, were destroyed, the early Earth may have been surrounded by a thin remnant of gas that contained various organic molecules. Much of this gas may have been swept away by the early solar wind, but some if it may have entered Earth's early atmosphere and ocean.

In other words, are we wrong in attempting to work out the origin of life on Earth from scratch — from very simple molecules? Suppose Earth started with at least some of the more complicated molecules and was at least partway along the road to life at the beginning.

The smaller bits of material in the Solar system may preserve these original molecules. There are carbonaceous chondrites, a kind of meteorite, that contain small quantities of amino acids and fat-like molecules, for instance.

Comets may have them, too. Indeed, Fred Hoyle feels that comets may be hotbeds of primitive life, and that even molecules as complicated as those of viruses may exist there. He has even suggested that a close brush with a comet may result in a strain of virus being deposited in Earth's atmosphere, a virus that may be pathogenic and one against which human beings would have little or no defense.

Could this be the origin of the sudden pandemics that afflict the Earth — as, for instance, the Black Death of the 14th Century? Or one might suggest that since Earth is supposed to have passed through the tail of Halley's comet in 1910, it may have picked up some viruses which finally multiplied into the cause of the great influenza pandemic of 1918.

I don't believe any of this for a moment, and I don't know of any scientist who goes along with Hoyle in his more radical speculations, but I'm surprised it has not served as a theme for science fiction stories yet.

Or (since I can no longer read all the science fiction stories that come out) has it?

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Here is something quite different from Gregory Benford, who is known primarily for his hard science novels. The story does have a physicist as its lead character, but he has died in a plane crash and finds himself in a strange kind of Hell. The story will appear in a book titled HEROES IN HELL, to be published in March 1986 by Baen Books.

Newton Sleep

BY
GREGORY BENFORD

May God us keep
From single vision
and Newton Sleep.
—William Blake

1.

The demon was a nerd.

It chewed raptly on a huge wad of yellow gum, obviously relishing the gooey smack of it, jaw muscles bunching. The white open-collar shirt, bulging belly that hung over a plastic belt, too-tight brown slacks, six pens in the shirt pocket, (several marked STYX BANK in glowing red), mousy brown hair sloppily combed and parted exactly down the center of his skull, bottle-thick lenses in transparent frame glasses — all said *overaged blimpoid undergraduate* to Gregory Markham.

The thing thing looked like a subnormal student in Physics 3A, a certain candidate for the cut at the end of the first quarter. Grinning, it blew a bubble. The filmy orange sphere popped, but the demon caught it with a sudden lashing of its black tongue, popped the wad back between its molars, and smacked it with delight.

"I . . . I don't follow," Markham began.

"You'll catch on." The demon's eyes widened with friendly interest, and it said enthusiastically, "How do you like these new elevators?"

"Ah . . . well, they're . . ." *Absolutely ordinary,* Markham thought. Gray steel, no carpeting, only one button on the console: THERE.

"Just got them installed. Howard Hughes did the work. Terrific!" The demon snapped its gum again as punctuation.

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"And we're going . . ."

"To Hell, yeah." The demon glanced at its watch. "Right on time, too."

"What happens when I get there?"

"That's not my job. Boy, I'll tell you, these elevators are *great*. Before the Hughes contract came in — late, sure, but under the bid — we had to lead you guys up the Socophilian Stairs."

"Up?"

"Yeah, that stuff about Hell being below is just a rumor, y'know. Anyway, those stairs — what a pain! Cold granite all the way, no handrails, corners worn off so you'd slip and bust your ass."

"The pits."

The pun seemed lost on the nerd. "No foolin'. Goin' back down was the worst. Any blood at all on those worn-down steps, and *whang* — you'd roll down, ass over entrails. And likely smack into a party of lepers or saints on the way up."

"Saints?"

"Sure, we get a lot of 'em."

"But I thought—"

"That's *their* opinion, of course. Y'know — *my sainted mother*, all that. Man, it's incredible, what people think of themselves. You talk about de*lu*sions."

"Is . . . is that why I'm—"

"Don't ask me, man. I'm just a gofer."

The elevator stopped with a labored *chunka chunka*. "Ah, great. I sure don't miss them stairs."

The sliding door was dinged and smeared with something brown. *New to the demon, maybe,* Markham thought, *but I know recycled junk when I see it.* He wondered what turned brown when it dried.

The door slid open with a hiss. An absolutely featureless floor of azure stone stretched limitlessly in all directions. *Lovely.*

"C'mon, move it. I gotta go back down."

Markham stepped out. *I wonder—*

The floor was not in fact stone. It wasn't anything except the illusion of substance that comes when you look at the utterly empty sky. Markham stepped and fell straight down, suddenly feeling warm air rush past.

Falling. This was the way it had been the last instant, when the plane went into the patchwork of wintry trees, the wings snapping off barren black branches as they came in too low, too fast—

He screamed. The vicious shrieking wind blew his tie into his mouth and he spat it out, all the time tumbling, arms flailing. He had never gone skydiving, had a repressed fear of heights, but had once gone to one of those vertical wind tunnels that supposedly simulated the experience. It had been at a meeting of the American Physical Society in Las Vegas, and he had been cajoled into it by colleagues.

So — Spread your legs . . . arms

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out . . . turn — there. He stopped rolling and hung steady, facedown.

Ocean. He was above a fast, glinting steel-blue sea. A green landmass lay some distance away, but he was going to hit the water. Not that it made a difference. He remembered that after falling only a few hundred feet, striking water was the same as pancaking into concrete.

How can this be Hell? Falling forever?

Through his panic he tried to think. He had felt little when the plane went in, just an instant when the bulkhead crumpled and trees and steel and the head of the man in front of him came spraying back, a single flash-instant of concussion—

The air howled and he could see whitecaps lacing the sea. He had reached terminal velocity now and the hard blue surface burgeoned with detail, the sweep of hidden currents crinkling the water.

Coming up fast now—

Markham had time to scream once more.

2.

It looked like a bank president. Three-piece suit, touch of gray at the temples, the sagging jowls suntanned and well shaved. The demon clearly thought it was doing a job beneath its station.

"But how come I was just shoved out like that? That guy said—"

"I can't keep track of every customer," the demon said. "You're probably remembering something from the Other Side."

"The hell I am!"

"These fantasies will pass," the demon said stiffly. He impatiently tapped one polished black shoetip on the elevator floor, shot his cuffs, and clandestinely tried to catch his reflection in the cloudy steel walls.

"But damn it—"

Chunka chunka. Again the door hissed aside. Beyond it lay another blue featureless expanse. The blue was darker, with a deep blue-green mottling that recalled ocean depths.

"I'm not stepping out there."

"Come, come." The demon made a smile that was broad and showed perfectly regular white teeth, but the corners of the smile did not turn up. Markham had seen a similar smile once when a Merrill Lynch broker had tried to sell him a limited partnership in natural gas.

"You go out there."

A sigh. "Very well." The bank president stepped with assurance onto the shiny surface. It stood with hands behind its back, the smile twisted into a condescending smirk.

Markham took a tentative step. His foot held, so he brought the other forward—

And fell.

This time the bottom-dropped-out sensation lasted only a few seconds

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as the demon dwindled above, grinning with satisfaction. With a bone-cracking jolt, Markham hit the water.

He gasped, sputtered, began to dog-paddle. His glasses had fallen off, but he could see there was no land nearby. He cursed once, then choked as a wave seemed to leap deliberately into his nostrils and throat.

The water was mild, salty. Markham stripped off all his clothes. He began to swim steadily, trying to keep a straight line. Only a sullen red glow lit the clouds above; it was impossible to navigate by it. He kept going, changing regularly from breaststroke to sidestroke to backstroke. Summers when he wasn't in Europe, he swam every day in the ocean near his home in San Juan Capistrano. He could probably last a good hour this way, longer if he just floated.

He was right. His Seiko kept ticking away. He set the timer and at the very end — exhausted, purple beeswarm dots dancing in his eyes, legs and arms numb, chest aching, mouth puckered with the taste of salt — noted that he had lasted two hours, thirteen minutes.

As he watched the digital dial, it abruptly changed to 666.

Then he drowned.

3.

Markham sagged against the gray steel. The demon was a woman.

This time he could not force his throat to work, to voice any protest. *Hell is this elevator,* he thought, fogged with fatigue. *It's that simple. Infinite death, infinitely prolonged.*

He had always been terrified of heights and he had died in an airplane crash. They had played on that. Then they had added the ocean, knowing somehow that while he loved the sea's raw power he had also feared it, felt vaguely uneasy with the green depths. He had overcome that by taking up scuba diving. Still, those deep anxieties had come out in the long struggle to reach shore. He could feel the effects, how close he was to hysteria.

The woman gave him an empty stewardess smile. Then she slowly reached down and lifted the hem of her red dress. Tantalizingly, with the same fixed glossy smile, she lifted it to show exquisitely formed, creamy thighs. She wore black stockings fastened with a red garter belt. Markham licked his lips. *So they know I like that. So what?*

The cotton dress slid easily over her head. She wore nothing else. She simply stood, smiling and silent. Then she winked and langourously blew him a kiss. It was exactly like a hologram Markham had seen years ago, and about as erotic. She was overweight and her skin had an odd sickly cast. *Like a corpse floating underwater,* he thought. *Or the underbelly of some deep ocean fish, the kind*

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with bulging eyes and contorted, purple mouths.

She licked her lips and made obvious, grotesque sucking motions. Her breasts trembled like jelly, and he saw that she had something tattooed on each. He squinted. The right breast said WELCOME, the left one WOMAN. They had been seared in, like the deep brown burns on a cowhide brand.

He stepped back. She cupped the breasts and held them out to him, her mouth still making the liquid, gluttonous sucking slurps. *This,* he thought wildly, *might already be Hell.*

Chunka chunka. This time there was a sandy beach stretching away in a broad curve. An ocean nuzzled at the shore in sets of rolling breakers. *Exactly the same blue as that water I . . .*

He backed away from the door. The woman stepped toward him, offering her breasts, reaching down to finger her black pubic bush. Her left breast oozed pearly pap.

Clearly, Hell lay beyond the elevator door. So it was either her . . .

Nobody was getting him through that door, Markham knew that much. If he could distract the woman, figure out how close the elevator—

He forced a grin. Her eyes widened with anticipation. He tentatively reached out toward her waist — and a black tongue licked out from her pubic cleft, a slick oily thing like a whip. It encircled his hand, drew it toward her. He pulled back as he caught the moist, sulfurous, rotting scent the tongue gave off. It clamped itself about his wrist, squeezing with convulsive power.

He gasped. "No!"

She caught him in an expert judo grab, one hand at his shirt collar, the other clamped into the small of his back.

Anger filled her jet-black eyes. Her spiked heel bit into his right foot. She roughly rubbed herself against him in a parody of erotic frenzy.

He started to wrench away from her rank foulness, and that gave her the momentum she needed to complete the throw. "Perhaps I can be of assistance," she said in a flat, impersonal stewardess voice, and threw him out the door.

He landed — *crunch!* — on the sand.

He rolled. Spat out grit. Sat up.

The elevator was gone.

"Hey, fella! Got a board?"

A tanned young man stood fifty yards away, holding a white fiberglass surfboard. Blond, blue-eyed, lean and muscular.

It seemed an absurd question to ask of a man in rumpled brown slacks, a camel jacket, and button-down blue shirt. "Ah . . . no."

"Too bad. Some good ones breakin' out there today."

Markham eyed the waves curling into foam about a hundred meters offshore. It *was* a good surfing spot.

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So much for the old fire and brimstone.

"What *is* today?"

Genuine puzzlement flitted across the blandly friendly face. "Why . . . today. It's always today."

One could scarcely argue with that. "I . . . Look, what's going on? I—"

"Hey, man, they're breakin'. Get outta those things and try some body surfin'.

"You go ahead. I want to . . . sunbathe for a while."

"O.K., just come out when you're ready."

"What's your name?"

"Donny."

"I'm Greg. Greg Markham."

"Brook's my last name. Good surfin' here, Greg."

"It's safe out there?"

"Sure. Sharks don't come in till night."

The man trotted into the surf. Markham was trembling, his mind churning. He sat down. He remembered a place like this on St. Thomas, where he had vacationed. At night the sharks had come in close to the beach, hunting along the edge of the Gulf Stream. From the balcony of their cabin, he could hear the splashing of the fish the sharks hunted; and if you went down to the beach, you could see the phosphorescent wakes they made in the water. At night the sharks feared nothing, and everything else fled. In the day they stayed out away from the clear white sand. Maybe this was because you could see their shadows rippling over the floury sand and get away.

He remembered that and noticed a dull glow at high noon, diffuse and red through the milky, blue-veined clouds. A midwinter sun, if he had still been in California.

Thinking about that calmed him. There was some continuity between his . . . *My life? But I still feel alive.* His life before, and . . . this. Hell.

He had died in an air crash. That much he remembered clearly. Then someone with a harsh, foul breath leering at him, hovering over his stripped and battered body, under raw, piercing orange lamps. All he could remember was that awful, greenlipped face.

His body was knotted with tension, his nerves spinning jittery along a tightrope. He had died, essentially, by falling. Then that fear had repeated in the long plummet from at least a mile up, into the sea. And the bank president demon had followed that with a real drowning.

They had his number, all right. Those were two of his greatest fears. He had been a swimmer all his life but had never overcome the feeling that eventually the ocean he loved so much would claim him.

Stop thinking about it. And don't even imagine other deaths. They can probably read your mind.

Think back further. Regain some of your own identity. That was all you had to protect yourself.

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He had always retreated from the world into his delicious realm of mathematical physics. That was his profession and his dearest love. Concentration on an intricate problem could loft you into an insulated, fine-grained perspective. There were many things you could see fully only from a distance. Since childhood he had sought that sensation of slipping free, smoothly remote from the compromised churn of the raw world.

He had used his oblique humor to distance people, yes, keep them safely away from the center where he lived. It even kept away his wife, Jan, sometimes. He saw that now with a sudden pang of guilt. Was that what had sent him here?

He had used the lucid language of mathematics to overcome the battering of experience, to replace everyday life's pain and harshness and wretched dreariness with — no, not with certainty, but with an ignorance you could live with, endure. Deep ignorance, though still a kind that knew its limits.

Markham stretched out on the sand, feeling his muscles surrender to their aches.

Limits. The limits were crucial. Galileo's blocks gliding across marble Italian foyers, their slick slide obeying inertia's steady hand — they were cartoons of the world, really. Aristotle knew in his gut the awful fact that friction ruled, all things groaned to a stop. *That* was the world of man.

The wonderful childlike game of infinite planes and smooth, perfect bodies, reality unwrinkled, cast a web of consoling order, infinite trajectories and infinitesimal instants, harmonic truths. From that cartoon realm it was always necessary to slip back, cloaking exhilarating flights of imagination in a respectable, deductive style. But that did not mean — when the papers appeared in the learned journals, disguised by abstracts and references and ornate, distancing Germanic mannerisms — that did not mean you forgot being in that other place, the beautiful world where Mind met Matter, the paradise you never mentioned.

So I died scribbling mathematics on a transatlantic flight, he thought wryly. O.K. That's who I am. Professor of physics, fifty-two years old, caught in Hell, unarmed and unprepared and definitely unwise.

He sat up, brushed away clinging sand. *Odd thoughts. Not memories of Jan or friends or a world forever lost. Instead, I recalled my work. What does that mean?*

Maybe that defined most deeply just who he was. *O.K., then. That's how it damned well is.* He smiled mirthlessly at the pun.

His fear had ebbed. Nerves still jangled, muscles were stiff from spasm, but the ocean had begun to work its old magic on him.

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Right, then. The first thing to do was figure out how this place worked. Reduce it to a problem.

He studied the dull ruddy glow that hung in the exact center of the sky's bowl. The sun? But it hadn't moved.

It's always today. Donny had said.

Maybe that dull glow never moved. If it was the sun, then this place was tide-locked, one face forever baked by that wan reddish radiance.

Slight offshore wind. Tall coconut palms that looked bent inshore by a trade wind.

He would've expected Hell to have a little more pizzazz. Out beyond the breaking waves, he saw gliding shadows. They flitted smoothly, never coming close to Donny.

He got up and walked to an overhang of rock at the end of the crescent beach. Donny's lifted arm looked black, scaly, like a reptile's sinewy leg and claw. Then Donny turned expertly out of the white, hissing foam and paddled for the next wave.

Markham sat on the prickly volcanic rock and dangled his legs over the drop. Below, waves battered the sheer stone face with explosions of brilliant white froth. *If this is Hell, I think I can stand it.*

He had never believed any of that kid stuff, anyway. Even if you burned forever, any mind would be driven into erasing madness after a while. They simply couldn't keep you on the edge of excrutiating pain and torment forever. Elementary features of any neurological system dictated that it would saturate, overload. Protracted agony would blow away consciousness itself. There would be no *you* to suffer, because the system of memories, relations, habits, and patterns that was you would dissolve before such a battering, searing, consuming onslaught.

So it made no sense, all that childish babble the moist-eyed ministers had prattled from their pulpits. He had once listened to it, had even been an acolyte in the Episcopal Church, but the usual adolescent skepticism had ripened into a scornful contempt for such delusions.

Though there is *a Hell,* he reminded himself. *It's just not the one anybody envisioned. The Christian idea simply wouldn't have worked. To really make you suffer, they'd have to give you a break. Let the mind recuperate. Relax the spasms, cool the fevered firings of neurons. Then return that dread-drenched mind to its own personal rack, tighten screws again, begin afresh . . .*

He preferred to think of matters this way. Reduce the world to a series of mechanisms — subtle, but understandable bit by bit — and then deal with each mechanism in turn. It was comforting, it worked, and in the end—

His name is Donny Brook. Donnybrook. A free-for-all fight. From somewhere in the air around him came a low, evil snicker.

He looked down in time to see

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the thing come leaping up from the water. It was sleek and silvery and not a shark. It had a yawning mouth with teeth that circled the entire huge maw, spikes of glinting razor sharpness. Out of the crashing breakers it came in a stupendous leap, straight up in the air, arrow perfect and relentless. He saw the blazing little red eyes, not like those of fish at all, filled with hate and raw rage — saw it all very clearly just before the thing reached the top of its arc and the round mouth closed around his feet.

The sudden pain stopped his scream, froze every muscle in a spasm of rekindled fear. The thing shook him with a convulsive jerk; raked him from the rock ledge; pulled him down into a long, excruciating fall as it gulped in midair and then gulped again in its feeding frenzy, the lancing fire shooting up through him in agonizingly long yet infinitesimal instants before he hit the cool, watery clasp. The great throat worked and he slid in, his face a rictus, the sour, dank stench of the gullet the last thing he knew.

4.

He sat on the floor of the elevator this time.

He was a mass of bruises and aches, and lightning flashes of memory would come to him, take him back to that endless pinned agony.

He forced himself to breathe, to think of something else.

They had known of his fear of the depths, of something slick and fast and all appetite coming after him. But they had played it subtly this time. Coaxed him out with Donny Brook — and when that didn't work, had sprung the trap just as he noticed the pun.

The Welcome Woman squatted over him, trying to a rouse some flagging interest. He did not have the strength to push her away. Her breasts brushed his face and he caught the sickly dank toad smell from her.

He now had an analytical understanding of this endless conveyor belt carrying him forward to his deaths. He would be forever terrified and forever taken, seized casually and put to the point. So that was to be it.

Or perhaps not. Each time had been a surprise. Maybe even this conclusion was wrong, was another way to set him up for another surprise.

Or maybe it was all a colossal infinite jest.

Sure. Or maybe this is heaven and you're just in a bad mood.

He could go on being terrified at the moment of death, brooding about it long beforehand, letting it crowd everything else from his mind.

Or he could cling to something else. But what?

His former life . . . *the* life . . . was now vague, diffuse. It slipped away eel-

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like when he tried to grasp it, remember his wife or their children, his friends, his small triumphs and defeats. Gone, or at least fast fading.

All that remained was his precarious sense of self.

He allowed the Welcome Woman to drag him to the elevator door and tumble him out onto a carpet of dry grass.

Getting up was too much effort. He saw trees, a somber sky . . . and slept.

He woke to find the empty, vacant, staring sky and the same scrawny trees. Mimosa, pine, eucalyptus.

He got up painfully, inspected the healing wounds in his legs and abdomen. Purple swellings oozed a clear pus. He would have to be careful of them.

Carefully, limping, he began to walk.

A long time later he staggered along a sandy roadway. He had seen several people pass but had stayed back in the pines, watching. His stomach emptied itself if he stopped to rest and think. Nothing but green bile came up, but his system insisted on going into its clenching spasm whenever he began to reflect on what happened.

A thumping in the distance grew rapidly louder. Markham leaned against a fragrant eucalyptus tree and gazed blearily down the road. Three roman chariots came charging through the rutted sand, horses struggling and sweating, their eyes wild and fever-hot as the drivers lashed them.

Markham roused himself from his sick stupor when the first chariot braked abruptly. A tall man wearing olive fatigues held up a commanding hand, stopping all three chariots. "Anyone been through here, my man?"

"Ah . . . somebody on horseback . . . I didn't see . . ."

"What did he look like?"

"I . . . Beard, blue jeans."

Two men, obviously guards, leaped from the other chariots and drew revolvers. Markham wanted to blurt out questions to them, but this didn't seem the best of times. The tall man waved a fleshy arm ahead. "Going this way?"

"Yeah. Hey, what's going on? I just—

A guard stepped forward and clipped Markham neatly on the chin, sending him reeling. "You will speak politely to the Supreme Commander."

Markham got to his knees. The blow had not hurt him — *How can anything, after what I've been through?* — but instead sent a hot jet of anger through him. "Who are you clowns, actors from—"

The boot caught him in the shoulder, and this time it definitely did hurt. Markham struggled up slowly.

"The Commander Hadrian will order you dispatched if you sass 'im," a guard muttered softly. "Stay down if you know what's good for you."

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Hadrian? Familiar, somehow. A poet? Markham's head buzzed. *No, a general. Took Britain.* He heard the commander say in a flat, almost unaccented voice, "He looks new to me. He may know Guevara from his lifetime."

"That right?" the guard asked, jabbing his boot into Markham's ribs. "You recognize Guevara if you see him?"

"Uh, yeah. He died several decades ago, but I saw the pictures, sure."

"Was it him, then?" Hadrian spat out impatiently. The horses pounded the sand and whinnied at the sharp, imperious note in his voice.

"I . . . I guess it might've been." Markham couldn't rummage through his memory and be sure, but that seemed to be the answer these bastards wanted. Maybe it would get rid of them.

"Anyone with him?"

"Not that I saw." Markham looked into Hadrian's face. A beak nose, sensuous full lips, a mouth accustomed to asking questions, not answering them. Intelligent green eyes set beneath bushy black brows that arched with nervous energy.

"How long ago?"

"Ten minutes, maybe."

"His horse, was it lathered?"

"Yeah."

Hadrian jerked a thumb at a man beside him who was burdened with a large backpack. "Get on that field telephone! Call ahead to Nuevo."

The man's mouth puckered with concern. "Well, I'll try, but these bumps, this equipment wasn't meant to take that sort of pounding, y'know, Commander. I—"

"Do it!" Hadrian muttered to himself, "Miserable cur."

Markham whispered to the nearest guard, "What's the nearest town that way?"

"Nuevo," the guard said. "Guevara's got support there. Me, I think we oughta burn the whole thing. Torch every shack."

The signals man fruitlessly turned the crank on his backpack. It made a *rrrrrttt* sound but nothing more. Hadrian fumed, slammed his palm against the side of his chariot, and finally barked, "Enough! We'll catch him ourselves. Come!"

The guards barely made their leaps into their chariots. The whole lot clattered off in a furious pounding of hooves and excited shouts. Markham got to his feet. *Hadrian.* He wished he had his *Britannica* handy. No, not a poet.

Markham trudged into Nuevo without thinking what to expect. In a realm where anything, presumably, could happen, he still was not prepared for the tanned and sandy chaos sprawled beneath the unwavering sky-glow, unrelieved by slant of shadow or hope of waxing light. Roofs of hammered tin, steaming sewage in old creeks, shanties of warped wood and flapping canvas, lice on the bare

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necks of infested chickens, gnarled figures cooked on cracked palm fronds held over snapping open fires, scaly old men with twisted yellow faces, children hunched in ditches gnawing at dead animals, smelly old women caked with dirt.

Nuevo was a harbor, the water black and greasy. Wooden-hulled scows bobbed in oily swells, thumping against creosoted pilings of pine docks. Scum had left its tracery along the quayside of square granite blocks that looked scarred and worn and ancient.

It could all be a hundred thousand years old, he realized. *Stonemasons from Ur, cavemen able to fashion bark canoes, an Australopithecus who could chip flint and stack stone — they all could've had a hand in this place. Hell,* were *having a hand.* Any of the walnut-skinned dwarfs laboriously stacking mud bricks could be older than Gilgamesh, wiser than Homer.

Nobody paid the slightest attention to Markham. He passed along the mud-colored walls of a long, official-looking building. Some guards at the entrance wore the same olive fatigues as Hadrian's men, though with rakish tan campaign hats worn at a tilt. They stood at parade rest, swarthy hands cupping what looked like Springfields or some other World War I vintage rifle.

Markham strolled casually by, guessing that to turn back would invite attention. He passed by some high windows framed with chipped brown wood. He only glanced upward at them, but in that moment a hand clasped the wood from inside and strained, turning white in someone's attempt to pull himself up. A sharp, surprised cry. The hand slipped, vanished. A thud as a body hit the floor inside.

He hurried on.

At the corner was a small, dusty lot. Three crosses of chunky oak stood there, apparently permanent, canted at angles. On each someone was crucified, head down.

Wasn't that some ancient way to do it, particularly for bad crimes? Markham's scholarly interest stirred and he slowed to stare. Bloated purple heads, engorged tongues lolling from warped yawns. One was a woman, breasts bared. A pine stake had been driven through her vagina and protruded from her mouth. The men—

He gagged and turned away before he could fully see all the effects. Yet passersby scarcely glanced toward the grotesgue figures, contorted with unspeakable — but for Markham not now unimaginable — agonies.

Awful, but not final, he reminded himself. *Poor bastards are probably reentering this charnel house right now.*

The point of executing anybody that way, obviously, was the pain. The experience of the past few — days?

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ıours? — had ground that into his ›ones. In Hell you always came back, ıke a ball batted around on a rubber ›and by a malicious giant. But the *›ain* — he shuddered at the memo- ies that came crowding in. How could nybody overcome the automatic hu- nan terror of death, coupled with he unbearable, ravaging way Hell pparently contrived it?

Is this it? I'm to be killed, then let ecover, only to die again? Forever? ınd why? *What did I do to be sent ›ere?*

He lurched against a stucco wall, veak with fevered confusion. For the irst time he could remember, he felt tirrings of hunger. So the appetites till exist here. he thought groggily. *ınd the means to satisfy them, too, ıpparently.* He had seen babies eag- rly crunch beetles in tiny teeth, old vomen licking toasted black beans rom rusty plates.

He wobbled into the middle of a nuddy street. There were few signs nywhere. He had already asked the vay of dozens of people, but none ver replied. There was little talk in he streets, no overheard conversa- ıons. *What was it Sartre said? Hell is ther people? Well, that's proved vrong. Or maybe it's worse to be gnored.*

Between slumping two-story apart- ıent houses stood a large white build- ng in the classic Spanish style, red ıle roof and big, wide windows with hutters. Above the broad entrance, swooping black calligraphy an- nounced FLORIDITA. Markham, his suit grimy and wrinkled, went in.

He swayed at the entrance of the ample room. A high vaulted arch gave an airy generosity to the warming mixture of brown wood tables, mut- ed red upholstery, and lush hangings of trailing vines. Nobody at the tables looked up.

At least the bartender has to talk to you, Markham thought sourly.

The bartender's fixed smile was like the rictus of a man who has died of a broken back. "A . . . beer." Mark- ham lowered himself onto a stool, feeling every joint and muscle protest.

The bartender nodded and drew a pale amber glass. The man kept up the frozen smile as he placed the fat glass before Markham and then glanced significantly at the cracked wooden bar surface. Markham was suddenly conscious that he had no money. Somehow, it had not seemed important.

"Pedrico, put this *padrone* on my tab," a gravel voice said next to Mark- ham's elbow. He turned. A deep- chested man in a woodsman's shirt and baggy drawstring pants held out a hand. "You just come through?"

"Yes. Several times."

"Sit over here." The man grinned, a sudden white crescent against a tan almost mahogany-deep. His face was furrowed as though a thunderstorm had cut ruts in a soft mound of dark clay. Gray stubble began at his chin

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and thickened as it ran along the jawline into thick, bushy hair. He led Markham to a corner table.

"Thanks. You're just about the only person who'll even notice I exist."

The old man sat down with a grunt and knocked back half of a frosted drink he carried. "They spotted you right away."

"As what?"

"New. Full of questions."

"So?"

"Ever have to explain the completely mysterious?"

"Ah."

"And do it again and again? Gets boring."

"I'm not expecting a Welcome Wagon or anything, just—"

"You got the woman."

"What? Well, yes . . . *that* was the welcome?"

The old man chuckled. "In a way."

"She threw me out the elevator door, but before that she . . . offered herself."

"No self there to offer."

"Her body."

"Won't do you much good. She gives it away and it's worth what you pay for it."

"That bad?"

"She's got rid of the clap, I heard."

"A demon with a disease?"

"They're all diseased."

"I hardly touched her."

The man's face crinkled as he chuckled darkly. "You're lucky the Agedness wasn't coming on her. There's fungus, brown stuff like shi with roots. Lives in her armpits Comes out about once a month, grow down the arms. She returns to he true state then, and looks it."

"True?"

"Her real age. One, two hundrec thousand years."

"She . . . ages . . . that much?"

"Guy in here a while back, he wa ramming it to her when that came on He's not going to forget that righ away."

"How could he bring himsel to . . . ?"

"Don't be so picky. This guy, he'c been fighting in Afghanistan. Though he was in the Moslem heaven at first Figured the Welcome Woman was a houri."

"Even so—"

"Man was horny. Not that she's any good for that."

"Why not?"

"You'll never get your rocks off with her. Impossible."

"But *why?*"

The old man grinned. "Them's the rules."

"Says who?"

"The Boss."

"Who is . . ."

"Right. Satan. Stay away from him.'

Markham paused, took a long drink. The beer was thin and frothy and without any taste. Somehow it seemed like beer when you held it in your mouth, but as soon as you swal lowed, it was like lifeless, tepid water

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This old man wasn't going to lay out a little lecture, but he did have information. Markham decided to get as many facts as possible and reason from there. "So you can't come with the Welcome Woman?"

"Nope. You want a better time, try Angelique. She's the whore over by the window."

Markham covertly studied the slim woman with smoky skin who was chattering amiably to a tight-faced man across the bar. "She . . ."

"There's a special rate if you take a room, too."

"Ah, well . . ."

"Otherwise it's standing up in the alley out back."

"No, I meant . . ." It was ridiculous to be embarrassed, but he was.

"Oh, you won't come with her, either — but she's good at the early stuff."

"Well, how—"

"You don't." The man's face collapsed into a swarm of wrinkles. "Or at least I don't."

Markham finished his beer silently. "I like the way this stuff tastes," the man said gruffly, holding up his empty glass. "Fresh green lime juice. Pedrico uses that coconut water that is still so much more full-bodied and takes the Gordon's gin just right. Bitters to give it color. A hell of a good drink."

The bartender brought fresh ones. "Greg's my name," Markham toasted.

"I'm Hem. Try this."

After the description, Markham had expected something good or at least different. But the cold fluid from Hem's glass, while it felt good when it first came into his mouth with a chilling rush, soon tasted like the same days-old water that had been left somewhere too long. "Ah, yes," he managed to say.

Hem gave him a narrow, silent look, and then drank half the glass himself with gusto, smacking his lips afterward. "Yeah, that's the stuff."

"Have . . . have you tried to figure out what's going on?"

The condescending expression on Hem's face was softened by a warmth in the eyes, as if the old man were looking back on some memory. "That's not the point."

"What is?"

"To bear up under it."

"Under what?"

"Whatever they throw at you."

"How?"

"Gracefully."

"No, I mean, how do they do it?"

"Not the point at all," Hem persisted, and drank more, throwing his head back with relish and seeming to go into a momentary swoon as the frothy tan drops overflowed and trickled into his beard, clinging as glimmering amber dabs.

"Look, you have to start by figuring out how things work. That's my training. I was — am — a physicist."

Hem laughed. "We don't get a lot of them here."

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"But you get some?"

"They pass through."

"Going where?"

"Mostly they end up in the Guard. Or else working for Hadrian's gang."

Markham rubbed his face where the heelprint of a boot still left its bruise. "Why?"

Hem peered moodily into his drink. "Keep the whole business running."

"How?"

Hem's jaw tightened and his mouth compressed as sudden life flared in him. "Boy like you ought to learn, it's not *how* that matters here. It's *why.*"

Irritated, Markham countered, "O.K., have it your way. What's this place mean, then?"

Hem leaned close to Markham's face, a cold, hard smile playing on his lips as he shaped the words very carefully, as though he had done this to newcomers countless times before. "*Nada. Nada. Nada. Nada.*"

"What?"

"One single thing. *Nada.*"

"Nothing?"

Ponderously, Hem held up a thumb and forefinger forming an *O.* "And if you want, you can have two things. *Un doble remordimiento.*"

Markham looked puzzled. Was Hem getting drunk, or was the man's personality slowly emerging from behind a protective shield?

"Two remorses," Hem said. "First, remorse for what you did. Second, for what you didn't."

Markham decided to humor him, like any drunk you meet in a bar. Though Hem did not appear to be drunk, really, only pivoting with Keplerian inevitability about some inner axis concealed from outsiders.

"O.K., what're *you* sorry for?"

Abruptly, Hem sat up straight, stopped clutching at the stem of the high glass. "The sky. I never looked at the sky enough when I had the chance. Like the way the blue was as hard and cold as good Arab steel. The solid blue and the big white clouds sailing in it. On a good day the sea was like that, good and hard and true."

Markham saw abruptly who this man was.

"I . . ."

"There are a lot of suicides here," Hem said slowly.

And Markham remembered. The shotgun placed carefully against the forehead, a cold winter day in Ketcham, Idaho, sometime in the early sixties.

"There are lots of girls from Spain," Hem said dreamily. "Plenty. Ones who got crossed in love or whose fiancés did not keep their promises and did the things to them anyway and then went off without marrying. They poured alcohol on themselves and set fire in the classic Spanish way."

Markham saw that it would be easier, and maybe better, too, if he made no sign of knowing. Maybe Hemingway would understand.

"You may enjoy these ladies. They

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come to town every now and then."

"They don't live here?"

"No, they're in the convents."

"Convents? *Here?*"

"They figure that's a way out."

"Is it?"

A bearish, sad-faced shrug.

"How . . . can anybody . . . get out?"

"Can't."

"But . . . we're still *people.* And this is like Brazil or someplace, not Hell at all."

"Ever been to Brazil?"

"Uh, no."

"Hell's more like Cuba, really. Even got Guevara."

"I heard."

A prick of alertness in the gray eyes. "Where?"

"On the road. A bunch in fatigues asked about him."

"How many?"

"Half a dozen or so. Guy named Hadrian in charge."

Hem relaxed. "So it worked."

"What?"

"Guevara's trying to draw Hadrian down this way."

"Why?"

"Hadrian's the—" Hem puffed up his chest and boomed out — "*Supremo Commandante!* Defender of the Antifaith. Ceaseless fighter against the Dissidents. Mean and faggoty and all-round asshole."

"He was in a hurry."

"Old Hadrian, either chasing D's or chasing ass — literally, in his case."

"What's there to dissent about?"

Hem blinked. "Why, getting out."

"How?"

"Nobody knows."

"Has anyone ever gotten out?"

Hem smiled evilly. "Nope"

"Then how the hell—"

"Look, Satan's got cops and the Fallen Angels and the rest. Guevara figures, knock them over and we can run things ourselves."

"And escape from Hell?"

"That's what he figures."

"What are the chances of that?"

Hem grinned. "*Nada.*"

"Then why's Guevara trying?"

"Our *nada* who art in *nada, nada* be thy name."

"Look, Guevara hasn't been here more than a few decades. I remember he died in the sixties, the same as . . ."

Only a quick pained flicker passed over Hem's face, like a storm cloud that moved on and wasn't going to drop any rain this time. "Go on."

"So have the Dissidents been operating only that long?"

"No. Hell, I heard Socrates led them when he first came."

"They've been going thousands of years?"

"Sure. Maybe hundreds of thousands."

"Without success?"

This time Hem laughed. "No, this is really the other place." A sudden belch erupted from Hem and he belly-laughed again. "Hey. *Un poco pescado? Puerco frito?*" he called to the

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bartender. "Any cold meats?"

The bartender scuttled over with a plate of twisted brown things. Markham suddenly felt hungry and ate one. It was tasteless but seemed to fill his need.

"So it's hopeless?"

"I don't know."

"Can't you find out?"

"How, Mr. Professor?" Hem leaned toward him, lips smacking with the grizzled meat. "Look it up in the library?"

"You guessed that I'm—?

"Sure. I always had the angle on you guys."

"I'm not a literary critic."

"Thank God."

"Nothing happens if you say that?"

Hem's eyes widened. "Say what?"

"God."

"Nope. You can swear all you like."

"You call on Him, He doesn't answer?"

"Maybe there isn't any."

"But if there's a Hell, there's—"

"Our *nada,* who art in *nada.*"

Markham jumped to his feet. "Dammit! I'm trying to find out—"

"Shut it! Just shut it!" Hem lumbered to his feet and bunched a hairy fist under Markham's nose. "You want to argue, you argue with this."

Markham was speechless. In his confusion a small part of him kept on observing and remarking. *A classic macho confrontation with the all-time macho figure, and it just comes over as a dumb drunken quarrel.*

"Look, I . . . isn't there something I can *do?*"

Hem breathed heavily for a moment, staring at Markham with gray eyes that seem to peer through him, toward a distant something. The man looked tired and out of condition. Against the sullen glow from a big side window, his gray hair formed a silvery nimbus about his skull.

"Yeah, maybe. Depends on what you want to find out."

"I'd like someone to talk to who has, well, really thought about this."

Hem smiled without humor. "You mean, thought the way *you* think?"

"I suppose so."

"Some professor?"

"No . . . a scientist. That's what I am." He paused, quelled a rush of emotions with a sip of the beer. "Was."

"There's some physicist Hadrian's got up at Kilimanjaro."

"Who?"

"Does it matter?"

"I need someone who knows modern physics, has kept up with quantum mechanics and—"

"No libraries here."

"If he simply questioned scientists who came through, he could keep current."

"I don't think many do show up."

Markham wanted to scream, *Then why am I here?* but he knew that would make Hem mad again to no point.

"Bohr? Einstein? Coleman?"

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"Never saw them. I don't hang around much with—"

"Oppenheimer?"

Hem chuckled. "Yeah. He's here."

"Why?" Markham's voice sharpened. "The bomb?"

"People don't come in with tags on 'em."

"How about Feynman? Bethe? Fermi? Teller?"

Hem shook his head. "I don't keep track. Just know this English guy's supposed to be good at a lot of stuff. Hadrian uses him for advice."

"How do I find him?"

"He's under lock and key near Kilimanjaro."

"The mountain's really here?"

To Markham's surprise, Hem looked down at the rough wood tabletop, fingered a dab of meat. "I . . . call it that."

"Where is it?"

"About twenty miles north."

"How can I get there?"

"Not easy. Have to work around some of Guevara's plans. We must find out when he'll create a certain diversion I know is coming up. Otherwise it's too dangerous."

"Why?"

"Kilimanjaro's dead in the middle of the war zone."

5.

A mud-brown village looked across a broad river at the foothills of the big mountain. In the bed of the clear water, there were pebbles and boulders and fish swimming among them. Troops went by the last house, and Markham stood in the doorway and watched them march toward the rolling thunder up in the hills.

Troops of all times. Detachments of vested longbowmen, thick quivers of arrows slanted across their backs. A squad of swarthy, dwarfish swordsmen, beetle eyebrows bunched in concentration. Lines of singing, scimitar-wielding, red-robed women. Haughty grinning grenadiers. Long columns of ruddy Roman shields-and-lances, stepping smartly in the churning dust, clanking and shouting and sporting gaudy yellow ribbons atop beaten iron helmets. Yet among them all were other weapons — flintlock rifles, oiled Springfields, bluntsnouted heavy pistols, sleek crossbows, chunky black grenades, even a stubby iron cannon lumbering forward on wooden wheels behind a sweaty team of Chinese women. Muslims in filmy shirts and leggings plodded remorselessly, swords dangling at leather belts. A brown-skinned officer in blue and gray dashed among the columns, shouting.

The woman who kept the place said the men had been going by like that all day. Their dust powdered the shimmery green leaves of the spindly trees beside the road. They came from all times and kept steadily on, most without looking to the side or

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talking, just the glazed eyes staring narrowly and keeping to the road.

"What's the officer saying?" Markham asked.

Hem chewed meditatively on a toothpick. "Greek."

"You understand it?"

"No. It's ancient Greek, not modern. Everybody spoke that until about a thousand years ago, somebody told me. A lot of the fighters still do. They don't see any point in learning English, which is what most people switched to."

The dust prickled the inside of Markham's nose and he sneezed loudly. "Where are they going?"

"Up to one of the formations."

"To fight whom?"

"Whoever's there."

Hem's eyes looked out from deep hollows, never leaving the ragged parade and the endlessly billowing dust. "The Moslems think if they can just defeat enough infidels, they'll be released to the cool garden oasis where houris wait and water runs and there are dates and grapes for all. The Christians believe they have to prove themselves against the heathen. Those dwarfs who went by think they're in some sort of battle for possession of heaven. The Egyptians believe they're going to rescue the pharaoh."

"They must have caught on by now that those stories are bullshit."

Hem laughed sourly. "Are they?"

"Of course. This isn't *any* traditional Hell."

"Most others think this is a test, a trial — not Hell at all. They'll tell you straight. What they've got to do is show their stuff."

"Why?"

"They want to do as well as the Greeks at Marathon. Or as well as the Yanks at Shiloh. That's the code they knew and died by, and that's what they'll stick with."

"And hope it saves them?"

Hem turned and peered at Markham in the dim bleached light. "What're *you* doing?"

"I'm trying to find out how . . . oh."

Hem slapped the doorframe with an abstract, pensive glee, grinning, and the old woman who served watery, tepid drinks looked up, hoping for more business. The troops didn't stop often, they were too remorseless. But others did, spectators like Markham and Hem.

"Y'know, I ran into General Cambronne along here once. He was leading a regiment of French regulars, some of them in the Old Guard Cambronne had commanded at Waterloo. I asked him about that story, the one about what he said when the Brits called on him to give up."

"Oh. 'The Old Guard dies but never surrenders,' right?"

"So say the books. Cambronne told me all he said was, 'Merde!' When I was in Paris in the twenties, proper people when they did not wish to pronounce it said 'the word of Cam-

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bronne.' It means 'shit', of course, shit of purest ray serene. All the truth of the things is in that one word, not in the big phrases people make up afterward."

"Then *why* are these—"

"It's the only action that means anything, can't you see that? They've got no God anymore, but there's still some chance that if they prove themselves, they can get out. The religious Johnnies think that, sure. But the rest of 'em — what was it that Patton said? Something about war being the greatest sport. Well, they're sporting men."

"And if they die?"

Hem waited a long time, staring out at the restless eternal columns. "You've been through that already."

"So they keep coming back?"

"Yeah. It's all they know."

"They like it?"

"Look at them. You think they do?"

Markham studied the faces — drawn and whitened, lined and grimed, mouths twisted and obsessed, eyes advancing with fiery mad zeal.

He hadn't read any Hemingway in decades, didn't remember much except the way the prose turned a spotlight on one luminous point after another, bringing small things fugitive and insubstantial in their own right into sharp focus like an Impressionist painting: daubs of light hanging in the vacant, airless space of your mind. A pressing sense of hazard, peril, danger oozed through that crisp frozen canvas, constant rehearsal of the final and perhaps only real battle. Hem's carefully chipped sentences had embodied a universe that was not man's alone, perhaps not man's at all, fragile and precarious and yet, when you paid exact attention to it, absolutely solid. Unalloyed. Irreducible.

To all that, Hem's response had been a stoic sense of personal integrity, expressed through a cold, proud know-how, detached. He had studied life as if he were watching a painting in the Louvre, trying to enter into it by applying a consistent, systematic method to everything he described.

But now they were all beyond that sharp, clear world, well past the looming test of death.

"Let's go," Markham said, shuddering.

"The guide's coming along now."

Hem had paid for a man who knew the way around the main battle zones, to the camp where Hadrian kept his supply depots and administrative offices. There the trading and supplying and manufacture for the incessant war went on. There, Hem said, was the English physicist.

The guide was short, black, with wary eyes. He took his money up front and spoke little. The coins Hem gave the man were octagonal beaten copper. A crude grinning face marked both sides, struck off-center.

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As the guide counted the coins, a sudden rattling of gunfire came down the road. Markham saw lines of men wavering at the nearest hilltop. Then some antlike figures turned and ran down the hill and others came after them. Thin cries rose. An artillery shell burst on the hilltop and bodies flew about the sudden ball of smoke, turning lazily in the air before bouncing down among the rocks.

"Outflanked them," Hem said.

"Why doesn't everybody use guns, at least? Those lancers, they're falling like wheat."

"Guns take factories, people who know how to mine, make machines — a lot. Most people here never saw a gun in their . . . first lives. They prefer to fight with what they know."

The lines broke and men scattered everywhere. They tried to reach the road, but their enemy poured forward, the swordsmen coming ahead and chopping them down from behind as they ran. Markham could hear screams, shouts. The columns on the road milled, surprised, and did not form up.

"Shouldn't we . . ."

"Yes. Let's go around this."

They moved quickly to the right, behind a long, straggly line of Arab archers. The guide said they would get clear easily. Markham kept up his loping run and after a few minutes saw that the man was right. The engagement swirled in confusion on the hillside, a knot of smoke and rushing figures.

They cut down a narrow draw and scrambled across a stream, leaping among a jumble of rocks and logs. Halfway across, Markham felt something soft beneath his feet and saw that they were running across a jam of bodies that had drifted downstream and fetched up among the debris of combat. The bodies were so plentiful that they stacked three deep against the rocks. *So you don't just vanish when you die,* he thought.

They reached a stand of fragrant eucalyptus. He said, "The victors in this battle — does anything happen to them?"

Hem said, "Nah. They go on to the next battle tomorrow."

"So even if you win the rat race, you're still a rat."

Hem shrugged. "These fought even when they thought they had only one life. Why shouldn't they fight now?"

"Why don't you?"

"I'm no rat."

Something fat and leathery flapped overhead, wheeled, and dove toward the distant clamor. Great wings supported what looked to be a swelling black intestine. "Satan," Hem said. "That's the form he prefers when he's feeding."

"On what?"

"Soldiers he feels aren't eager enough for the battle."

Markham watched the huge thing

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descend upon a luckless band atop a far hill. Satan picked up a struggling figure, bit off a piece and — apparently finding it not to his taste — flung it aside.

Hem ignored this and peered at clouds scudding toward the snubby, snow-crested mountain he called Kilimanjaro. "Looks good for the next few hours. Storm moving in."

6.

Three hours later, according to his Seiko, Markham lay in the gloom beneath roiling skies and appreciated the shelter of the storm. Rain-soaked, muddy, sore from falls and sudden wild dashes to escape artillery bursts, he peered ahead. A drop traced itself down his brow, hung on his nose. Insects buzzed and stung at the nape of his neck. Things rustled in the weeds. Markham tensed and knew there was nothing he could do. Earlier he had seen an emaciated brown man get bitten by something long and yellowish, an incredible slick, shiny snake with a lashing tail. The man had rolled and kicked and died with an awful rattling cough, even before the snake could uncoil and glide into the bushes.

Artillery muttered over the horizon. Clouds boiled in, bringing sounds of clanging steel and distant anguished cries. Markham turned his head slowly as Hem had said, using peripheral vision. Nothing.

"Move on up," Hem whispered.

Markham wriggled on, mud's liquid fingers tugging. Their guide had abandoned them a hundred meters behind, pointing in the gloom toward the jumbled buildings of Hadrian's Office of Military Supply.

They had reached the right place at what Hem's informant said was the right time. Che Guevara planned to capture Hadrian somewhere a few kilometers away in some complicated maneuver. That would provide distraction and allow Markham and Hem to slip in this way. The attempt should have started half an hour before — though what anyone meant by time here Markham had not discovered, since there was no daily cycle to give it meaning or measurement.

"Sounds like some rifle fire over that way," Hem said.

Quick snapping sounds, then nothing. "It's probably had time to draw away most of the guards."

"Let's go, then," Markham whispered.

He and Hem slipped from shadow to shadow. The unmoving glow above could not penetrate the hovering rain clouds. "You hear anything?" Hem asked.

Markham listened. Then he did. A scrabbling of nails on a rocky outcrop, a dark mass oozing out of shadow coming fast — a dog? — and before he could think, it hit him. He rolled, then felt a wet, hot mouth, and then sharp teeth coming together on his

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fingers. He bit his lips to stop from screaming. The thing grunted with eager hunger. Something broke in his hand.

He rolled the thing against the ground, slamming it hard, and managed to twist the head away with his left hand. A corrosive reek of musk and acid filled his nose. Its mouth free, the thing said clearly, "You. Die. Now."

Markham grabbed at matted, bristly hair and wrenched the thing away, keeping the mouth back with a punch to the throat. He felt a dull impact transmitted through the bulk of it and saw Hem stab down again, then again. The weight came on Markham fully, and he realized the thing he held was a large, misshapen dog-man, four sinewy legs tapering into sharp claws, head narrowing to a snout and slack, drooling mouth. He pushed it away with disgust.

"One of Hadrian's breeding programs," Hem said thoughtfully, wiping his blade on the dog-man's coat.

"Good God."

"I should've mentioned them. A good sign though."

"Why? If there are more of these—"

"Means Hadrian's pulled his men off this post right now. He must be using them for personal guards, worried about Guevara."

"So?"

"Means we'll have less to go through."

He was right. They crawled another hundred meters and this time were ready when a black shape came lumbering at them. Hem caught it in the throat with a single quick jab. Markham had his knife out — bought from the guide — but wondered if he could use it properly. They duck-walked toward the first low wooden frame building when a voice called from startlingly nearby, "Jumbar! here, ole fella! Jumbar boy!"

Ole Jumbar isn't in the watchdog business anymore. Markham thought with satisfaction. He lay down to let the man pass.

A crunch of boots on gravel that seemed only inches away. Markham saw a moving patch against the sky. The knife was firm in his hand. He leaped up, lunging — and grabbed the man around the throat, silencing him. He dropped the knife and twisted the man down into the mud. Hem came swarming over them, swearing in a quick, angry whisper.

"No!" Markham cried, but he felt Hem's arm come down and plunge a blade to the hilt in the man's chest. The body jerked, coughed, rattled — and went limp.

"Why in hell didn't you cut his throat?" Hem whispered.

"I . . . I thought . . . I could keep him quiet."

"And if he got his mouth free? Want to bring everybody?"

Markham still felt all the prohibitions against killing, though he didn't

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want to say that. Hem seemed to understand, but said nothing. He motioned and they trotted toward a squat wooden frame building, one of the few whose windows spilled warm yellow light onto the muddy field.

Markham inched open an unlocked door and looked inside. A lone man hunched over a table, scribbling. Markham slipped inside.

The man looked up. His mouth formed a startled pouch below darting, intelligent eyes. The face held a look of concentrated energy, yet the man said nothing as Markham approached, whispering, "Just keep quiet."

"In faith, you much surprised me."

"I'm looking for a scientist," Markham said as Hem slipped into the room. "An English—"

"I be the only such abouts."

"I've just . . . arrived here."

"Come ye in."

The man appeared about forty, dressed in green fatigues. His skin was bone white, as though he never went out, and his long face had a look of pensive, dreamy power. Markham approached the table and glanced at the familiar sight of pages covered with equations. "I labor most times to set right Hadrian's turgid shops and yards, to manufacture the implements of retribution for use against the armies of darkness engendering. These restful hours I pursue mine own works."

"You're a physicist?"

"Aye, much as these rogue Moors and heathen let me be."

"Your name?"

"Isaac. Isaac Newton, late — very late — of Cambridge and London."

Good grief. "I . . . sir, I have come to you for help. You are widely regarded as the greatest intellect of all time."

"Stuff and drivel." Newton threw down his quill, spattering pages with ink. "Many pass through with such words slithering from their rubied lips, but I think it is one more Mephistophelian ruse."

"No, honestly, you are. You started modern science. You've heard of Einstein? He—"

"I've met a conjuration of that name."

"You know of his, ah, advancements beyond your work?"

Newton sniffed. "I heard of melting clocks and sliding sticks."

"It's more than that, I assure you. But my real question is, sir" — Markham gestured wildly, his head aswarm with questions — "what *is* this place?"

Newton looked sternly at him, ignoring Hem. "All mankind is of one author, and is one volume. When one man dies, no chapter is torn from that great book, but translated into a better language."

"Uh, what?"

"This is but another edition. A fresh tongue. A proving ground, God wot."

"To prove . . . what?"

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"The Lord's eternal lesson. We are cast here amongst shameless Papist logicians, slimy Portugals, wily wenches fit solely for rutting, black-amoor armies, dark dread powers — all to find our own writ way."

"To . . . What?"

"The Lord's great mercy."

"But we're in *Hell*."

Newton frowned. "So it would seem to the unattended eye. I assure you though, fresh traveler full of gapes — this is no damnation. Such destiny would make the reason reel."

"What is it then?"

"A fool's test."

"And if we pass?"

"Heaven then, for the quick-eyed."

"And the rest?"

"More dour fretting. Here we feel the sharp bite of guilt, for life brief and nought done."

"You're . . . sure?"

"As sure as I fix on the rheumy ancientry. Bookish learning, the pen's fair incessant wallow — that be our exit for this nightless inspection."

"Then we can find a way out?"

"With proper twist to the ken, aye."

"Using science?" Markham gestured toward the mounds of sheets that sprawled across the ample pine table. An oil lamp cast sharp shadows across endless hen-scratch lines.

"Oh, nay. Nor vain tattle, waffling poesy, or any other airy art."

Markham shook his head. "But science is the only way I ever knew to understand the world."

Newton gave him a warm, broad smile, yet the eyes remained intent, unyielding. "So thought I, long ago. But a man might as well study rubor, calor, tumor and cholor — they are equal afflictions. Science sleeps here."

Markham glanced to the side, saw that Hem was leaning against the door, grinning slyly. "What changed your mind?"

"The Eye." Newton said softly, a bony white finger spiking upward.

"You mean . . . the sun?"

"Ha! 'Tis no sun. It never moves."

"We could be locked to it by tides, like the moon."

"Tis an eye that watches all below."

"*Whose* eye?"

"Satan lives among us here, bleak-spirited and vexed, powerful and lightning-swift. It be not he above."

"So?"

The *Lord* witnesses. The Lord judges. His single all-seeing eye, cloud-shrouded ever. And it falls to us to riddle our way into his good light."

"Riddle?"

"To fathom heavens that the mere present man's eye cannot glimpse."

"Look, you just *said* nobody sees the Eye through the clouds. So what heavens are there to, uh, fathom?"

"The astrological pattern, fat with truths."

Dizzy, Markham leaned on the table, disturbing a sheet. Newton leaped up, snatching at it. "No! You'll not

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see the traceries!"

Markham had glanced at a sheet, and saw that elaborate signs and emblems of the zodiac covered them. He remembered that Newton, though the greatest of scientists, had in fact devoted most of his career to theology and alchemy. The man's mind had been broad and not always able to discern what was science and what was sheer humbug. He had also been deeply suspicious of others stealing his work. That led to a nervous breakdown. Abandoning his Cambridge chair, he had become Warden of the Royal Mint, a scourge of counterfeiters. That surprising administrative ability, combined with sharp intelligence, was undoubtedly why Hadrian had used him here.

Newton rushed around the table, spitting oaths. "I knew you when you appeared! Last time it was offers of gold, of ambergris and musk, of unicorns' horns, was it not? I see you, Quathan the Unrepentant. Begone!"

"No, you don't understand. I'm a scientist, a natural philosopher like yourself."

"Necromancer at best, deceiver!"

"I studied your laws in school! I, I—"

"Such laws as were, rule not here. Aristotle's rude rub holds in the flattened land. Things left alone do not glide serene — they stop, velocity eaten by friction's waste. For such are we — waste."

"But you founded true astronomy. You could apply your laws here, or something like them. By careful observation . . ." Markham's voice trailed off. "You've already tried, haven't you?"

"Only astrology functions here. Reading signs, divining portents — that is the true learning."

"You can make real, rational predictions that way?"

Newton's face twisted into a congested mask. "Newcomer, on Earth you and I knew that Reason led to understanding, but Death ruled. Here Death can merely return you to Hell. Otherwise it is powerless. If there is a divine transition from this place, it must come from Reason — but not the narrow notions of mechanistic science."

"But that's all we have!"

"So?" Newton's eyes became crafty. "Yet I know what your scientism did after my departure."

"We advanced, built on your foundations—"

"And rid yourselves of God. Swept Him from the world's stage. Ordained that the equations ruled, that the mere will of man or God was as nothing compared to them."

"Well . . . " Markham began uncomfortably.

"Having displaced human will from the natural world, Doctor Scientist, now explain *this* place." Newton swept an arm in an all-encompassing circle.

"Well, what can we study, how—"

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"We must rely not on forces and fluxions, but upon the innate sympathies and antipathies of occult knowing."

Markham could not help himself. He had had a lifetime of dealing with cranks at cocktail parties, with otherwise reasonable people who believed in fortune-telling or ancient astronauts or dead superstitions. "That stuff is nonsense."

"Is it! Well!" Newton's eyes now blazed and jerked with fevered energy. his bony fingers clamped the table, long arms braced to defend the field of scribbled scraps. "You'll not learn how I read the heavens through blankets of sulphurous cloud — not until I have finished my researches! Tell the Devil *that*, if you dare."

Markham sighed. "I'm not from the Devil. I don't give a damn — literally — about your astrological garbage."

"Then get thee hence on any account, conjuration! What a sorry thing you be."

With that, Newton abruptly began to mutter to himself and stir the sargasso of papers. Markham could hear: ". . . if only I'd not . . . the Trinity, had I but believed truly in Father, Son and Holy Ghost . . . or not castigated so Flamsteed for that data . . . or Leibniz over discovery of that trifle, the calculus . . . this is the third temptation of a week, by my troth . . ."

Markham followed Hem's beckoning hand at the door. "We better go before the next round for that guard," Hem said. "Somebody'll notice."

Out, into muggy air beneath a cold gray mass of mottled clouds that hugged the hillsides.

As he stumbled down a steep slope, letting the bushes scratch him, Markham knew there was a kernel of truth in what Newton said, an idea . . . It slipped away.

Clearly any mechanistic physics was inadequate to deal with a place where ancient evils reigned. Somehow this filled him with joy, though he could not say why. If he got a moment to think . . .

"Patrol over there. This way!" Hem whispered. They bent and crawled through scraping manzanita.

Hem, Newton, Hadrian . . . what are the odds on meeting them? Maybe Hell has most of the famous . . . a place for unique, consuming sins . . . but then why me? I was nobody special. Some good physics, minor transgressions, nothing lurid. Why me?

They worked their way down an arroyo and into a dried creek bed. The going was easier, and Markham felt good to be trotting doggedly away from the confusions that Newton had planted in his mind. It was a *stage*, where dead players trod . . .

They passed through low scrub trees, and up ahead there was only gloom. They ran for ten minutes. Markham panted, trying to keep up. Hem was older but had a solid, steady pace and puffed easily.

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"Alto!"

The shout from the trees made Hem duck and roll away, into the bushes. An arrow whistled by. Markham froze, then dove for cover — only to find two big men with gleaming shortswords blocking his way.

Hem got no further. Quickly a squad prodded them into a clearing nearby and a scowling man came striding over, whispering, "Who this?"

Hem said, "We're just passing through."

"You are from Hadrian?"

"No, we're leaving the battle."

The man laughed. "Cowards? You run?"

"Let's say we bore easily," Markham said.

"I say you are Hadrian men."

The accent, the flinty eyes, scruffy beard — Markham saw suddenly that this was Guevara. *Hell is for the famous. Maybe that's the ultimate sin, after all. But there were plenty of spear carriers — literally — here. So maybe they were famous ten thousand years ago. But then, why me?*

Hem said casually, "I drank with you once, remember?"

Guevara peered through the dusty light. "Ah, yes. The writer. Two Americans we have here, where they should be not."

Hem said contemptuously, "Hell is free. Perfectly free."

"Not for all," Guevara said. He snapped his fingers and a short fat man came hurrying over. Markham could see there were about twenty men with weapons forming lines in the gloom. A short distance away, three held a man captive, hands tied. Markham recognized Hadrian's long, fleshy nose. The face was withdrawn, somber. Blood dripped slowly from his nose and spattered a luxuriant white tunic.

"Tickle them," Guevara said.

The fat man in filthy fatigues took out a knife and without hesitation casually jabbed Markham in the ribs.

Guevara asked, "Where? You from where?"

Markham kicked him in the balls. Someone grabbed Markham from behind and pulled his arm up so that it twisted in the socket. Markham shifted right and Hem came down on the man's back, and then there was the fat man's face in front of him and he punched at it. The fat man stabbed with the knife but missed, and then they were all rolling hard on the ground, the dust filling Markham's nostrils.

Someone kicked him in the side, and then he was on his feet again, hands pinned behind him. Guevara stepped near, smiling. "You are confessing your opposition to the revolution."

"What revolution?"

"Against all. You are newcomer? *Sí.* You would join, then? To revolt! To fight our way through Hadrian and the devils and all."

"Then where'll you go?"

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Guevara gestured expansively. "Beyond."

"You know a way out?"

"We will find one."

"You're condemned to perpetual revolution?"

Guevara's mouth tightened. "You try to be funny."

Markham felt heady from the curious elation that had been slowly gathering in him since he had left Newton. In his life on Earth, he would have been cautious of a man like Guevara, but now he saw this man as negligible, the macho posturings a mere show.

"Not as funny as all this empty ritual."

"You are a friend of Hemingway?"

"Sure."

Guevara smirked at Hem. "You escaped Cuba before we had chance to slit throat."

Hem smiled coldly and said nothing.

Guevara looked at both men, calculating. "This time I make no mistake. I not trust you."

"Trust us with what? Just let us go, dammit."

"When the rescue party following Hadrian fans out, they question you, find which way we go."

A sinking cold feeling ran up Markham, and he tensed painfully, fighting the old fear. "Take us with you, then."

Guevara shook his head dismissively. He waved a hand and said to the short fat man, "Do these."

Guevara said it with such obvious ease that Markham knew he had given the order before on this mission, would give it again with equal unconcern.

From Markham's experience, he could see Guevara's logic. Though the dead returned to Hell, they reappeared elsewhere, and later — well after this skirmish would be over. A simple way to get rid of troublesome types.

The short man was quick and came in with the knife low, tilted up, eyes fixed and feet shifting lightly in the dust. Markham strained against the hands holding his arms behind him. The fat man plunged the knife into his belly, and for an instant he felt the impact but nothing more. Then the slow, cold ache of it came into him, and he convulsed with fear, and then the hands were no longer holding him and he ran straight at the fat man. His fist lashed out and caught the man solidly on the cheek. The face fell away and he was running hard, shouts all around him, the pain now a low, slumbering ache and his bunched muscles feeling good to be used and to breathe deeply and run.

Someone chopped at him with a sword, but he ducked and lurched to the side, feeling light on his feet and quick. The faces swept past in a liquid way as if underwater, and he heard feet pounding behind him. When he came to a narrow lane free of brush, he looked back expecting

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to see Guevara's men pursuing, but it was Hem, doggedly loping behind.

He went that way for a while. It felt good, and there might be Guevara's murderers behind him, and anyway, he could not feel the pain this way. It sat there, a glowing, smoldering ember waiting to burst into fire, but he could keep it that way if he didn't stop.

But then a fire grew in his lungs and his heart racketed in his chest and he slowed.

Hem was far behind. Maybe Hem had called to him, but it would not come clear and solid in his mind. He remembered a movie he had seen, *Barry Lyndon,* and how at the end, in a final freeze-frame of a crippled and sour man getting into a carriage, some cold, modern typeface said: *Whatever you may think of these people, they are all equal now.*

But it wasn't true. Nobody was equal here, they were all following their own trajectories, shaped by their obsessions.

Somehow that seemed to matter, and as he ran on and felt the wetness running down his legs, he knew finally what Newton meant.

Markham came to some rocky ground and scrambled over some boulders. He could not see well, there were purple specks swarming in his eyes, so in a way he was not surprised when his foot slipped from the blood and he felt the boulder give way. It lurched aside, teetered — and was gone, thumping below.

He clutched for something, anything — caught a shrub — lost it — raked fingers across a smooth rock face — clasped at a dusty ledge — thrashed madly — and was gone — falling straight down, tumbling. He caught a glimpse of a narrow box canyon, the ground swelling up so fast he could not cry out—

He woke sometime later.

This time they would not let him die so quickly. He tried his legs and saw the left shinbone jutting out, a white blade like a knife thrust clean through him. The left arm, too, was turned wrong and he could not move it.

The pain did not seem to matter so much this time. It was just another thing that got in the way of thinking.

Hem came out of the shrouded dusky radiance and said, "Damn fool. I told you not to run when you're wounded."

"You're just pissed 'cause I beat you."

He had meant at running, but Hem took it differently. The big, rough man looked at Markham's wounds and nodded. Markham studied Hem's face and knew that whatever happened, Hem would not die, could not die. That thing had been denied Hem and would be forever. The thing he had prepared for in life, he could not have here.

Hem squatted down and said, "That bunch wouldn't have followed

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us, anyway. They've got to make tracks themselves."

"Ye . . . yeah."

"Let me see."

"I'm all right."

"The hell you are."

"*Oh.*"

"Pretty bad?"

"I'm getting better at it."

"Breathe deeply. It helps."

He did, and then a slow, seeping weakness came up from the gut and he felt it in his chest and in his arms.

"They got you, too." He pointed at Hem's shirt where a red splotch grew.

"Little bastard slipped it into my ribs as I went past him."

"They used the old falling number again."

"It work?"

"No. I'm not scared of it. They're running out of ideas."

"They've got plenty."

The clouds above were thinning but not breaking up. He saw as he moved to ease the low ache in his gut that more light poured through the clouds from the Eye or the star or whatever it was, but the foggy bank would not break and let him see what lay above them. He would never get to stare directly into the Eye.

He was far away now, even though he could feel the gritty, hard sand he lay on, and there were no problems at all. It was going to be bad this time, and he knew that, but it did not matter now. He had the fear of death in him that the devils had used and he knew that fear would not go away, but he had learned how to risk death now and know what the risk was worth. He had learned something from Newton, even if he did not fully comprehend all of it. He had beaten *them*, whoever or whatever ran this place, just by facing the thing he feared.

Hem was saying something, but he could not hear very well now for the ringing.

Church bells? Sure, church bells in Hell.

It was just the endless chiming of shock and blood loss in his ears, he was sure of that, his reductionist self hovering there ready with an easy explanation. Always ready.

He felt damp air and tasted it, and it came into him.

The thought that had been trying to get through finally did then, and Markham nodded to himself with professorial pride, glad to finally see.

They are all equal now. And equally important.

The swarm of tics and traits that was each human personality, that came out of swimming mystery and persisted . . .

"It's not over," he said.

. . . science had brushed that aside, enshrined instead the mindless physical world as the provider of order . . .

Hem laughed. "It sure isn't," he said gently.

. . . what was important was not some nebulous Word Mind or Spirit

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of the Universe that was a hollow echo of the old dead God . . . not some flaccid compromise substitute, some abstract idea served up by embarrassed modern theologians . . .

"Y'know, when I come back . . ."

"I'll save a beer for you."

". . . I think I'll take up hang gliding."

No — it was *you* and all your fragile vexing memories and hates, loves and dreads that mattered.

"Screw science," Markham said. "I like this better."

Dimly he saw, too, that because a choice of actions still persisted, Hell could not be final. His mathematician's habits immediately gave him a vision of an infinite series of airless alabaster hyperspaces, each folded one into another, and the raw white Ping-Pong ball of Self bouncing among them all . . .

He relaxed completely on the pine-scented sand and prepared to let himself be carried off in the jaws of jackals, off to greater adventures and places unknown in the bowels of the Great Beast.

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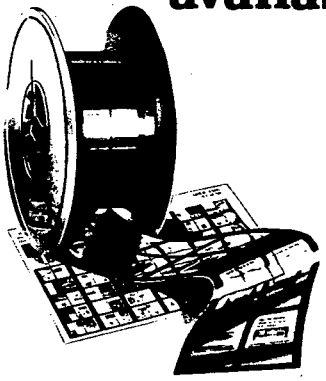

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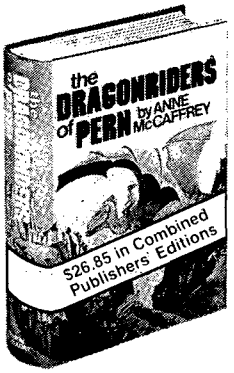

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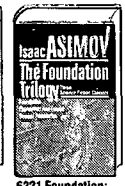

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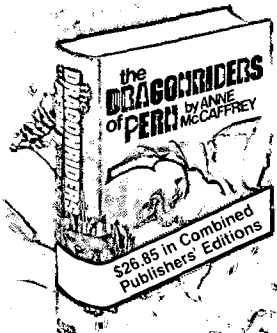

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